

Between writing degree zero and the neutral: Roland Barthes utopia of language / *Entre o grau zero da escrita e o neutro: A utopia da linguagem em Roland Barthes*

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to discuss the conception of language utopia in Roland Barthes, as well as its relationship with the notion of *Writing Degree Zero* and *The Neutral*, notions that refer to linguistic phenomena that break with the paradigmatic and binary structure of language. Therefore, the reflection on the utopia of language in Roland Barthes seeks to understand to what extent the French author understands form as value, linking an ethical and political dimension to his aesthetic project. In this way, we discuss how Barthes understands the utopia of language as a possibility of resistance to the fascist character of language in *Writing Degree Zero*, *The Pleasure of Text*, *The Rumor of Language*, *The Neutral* and *Lesson*. In addition, the possible relations of meaning made between *Writing Degree Zero* and *The Neutral* in the light of commentators of the Barthesian work that study the conception of language proposed by Barthes are commented: Jean-Claude Milner, Bernard Comment, Rodrigo Fontanari and Leda Tenório da Mota.

KEYWORDS: Barthes, Utopia, Language, *Writing Degree Zero*, *The Neutral*, Form

RESUMO

O presente artigo tem como objetivo discutir a concepção da utopia de linguagem em Roland Barthes, bem como sua relação com a noção de Grau zero e Neutro, noções que fazem referência a fenômenos linguísticos que rompem com a estrutura paradigmática e binária da língua. Para tanto, a reflexão sobre a utopia da linguagem em Roland Barthes busca compreender em que medida o autor francês entende forma como valor, vinculando a seu projeto estético uma dimensão ética e política. Nesse percurso, discute-se como Barthes compreende a utopia da linguagem enquanto possibilidade de resistência ao caráter fascista da língua em *O grau zero da escrita*, *O prazer do texto*, *O rumor da língua*, *O neutro e Aula*. Além disso, comenta-se as relações de sentido possíveis feitas entre *O grau zero da escrita* e *O neutro* à luz de comentadores da obra barthesiana que estudam a concepção de

linguagem proposta por Barthes, a saber: Jean-Claude Milner, Bernard Comment, Rodrigo Fontanari e Leda Tenório da Mota.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Barthes, Utopia, Linguagem, Grau zero, Neutro, Forma.

1 Introduction

To understand Roland Barthes' concept of language utopia, the hypothesis of the possible convergence between the Barthesian *The Neutral* and *Degree Zero* concepts is outlined. In this journey, we discuss to what extent Barthes realizes in the seminar the utopia of language that binds morality and form announced in *Writing Degree Zero*.

To this end, a bibliographical review of the Barthesian theoretical panorama is carried out, commenting on the main works that make reference to the phenomenon of *Degree Zero* and *The Neutral*. Next, it seeks to reflect on the possible relationships between Barthes' conception of language and the theoretical formulations of Jean-Claude Milner, Bernard Comment, Jacques Rancière, Rodrigo Fontanari and Leda Tenorio da Mota, respectively.

At first, one travels through the Barthesian essay trajectory in order to understand to what extent Barthes thinks of the utopian side of literature as a vanishing point to where most of his reflections about language converge. Although his statement that language is fascist dates back to 1979, it is possible to see that the problem of the assertive structure of language has accompanied him since the beginning of his intellectual trajectory. In many moments he reflects on the linguistic system as a condition of enclosure that only literature could cope with.

Then, the *Le pas philosophique de Roland Barthes* [*The Philosophical Step of Roland Barthes*], by Jean-Claude Milner, is discussed to show in what sense the notion of *Neutral* is elevated by Barthes to the category of idea, in a phenomenological perspective. To this end, an attempt is made to explore the relationship between *The Neutral* and Milner's formulations to understand how the concept of *Neutral* designates phenomena that escape Cartesian logic and break with the paradigmatic and dichotomous structure of language. Soon after, there is a debate about the propositions of Roland Barthes, *Vers le neutre* [*Towards The Neutral*], by Bernard Comment. The critique helps to think in what sense *The Neutral* can be studied as a reading key capable of adding unity and coherence to the Barthesian language project.

Finally, a dialogue is held with Jacques Rancière in order to think about the utopia of language as a politics of writing and distribution of the sensible, insofar as *Neutral* writing can also be understood as “the meeting of the orphan letter that can be appropriated by the poor and

the anonymous at the moment of the fulminating meeting with fragments of the infinite” (RANCIÈRE, 1995).

2 Roland Barthes' route

2.1 *Writing Degree Zero*

In *Writing Degree Zero* and *Lesson*, Barthes understands the utopia of language as the state in which discourse would finally rest from the assertiveness of language, ridding itself of the authoritarian condition that forces it to say. In this way, the utopia of language could refer to a form of enunciation in which society would be able to rest from the worn-out crystallization of senses through the advent of free language.

While *Writing Degree Zero* deals with a selection of critical essays on the interweaving of literature, language and society, *Lesson* reproduces Barthes's presentation on the inauguration of the chair of Literary Semiology at the Collège de France in 1977. Both works propose the conception of a literary semiology through which Barthes sees things and relates with the world.

Before becoming a subject about which one speaks, literature is then understood by Barthes as a certain posture before life, which allows the subject to be safe from the aggressions that prevent the practice of delicacy – so dear to the literary form – of being present in common existence and in human relations.

For Barthes, language is violent in that it imposes a syntactic structure and does not take into account the subtleties that go through existence. To escape this violence and not to give up lightness, the author proposes literary semiology as a practice and posture of life. In "The calm word", preface to Roland Barthes plural, Leyla Perrone-Moisés ponders:

Barthes' kindness was more than just a temperamental or acquired behaviour. [...] Kindness is a way to slow down human relations. For Barthes, everything passes through language, and this, according to him, is not essentially gentle. [...] As a man who saw language, these two constraints of language have always displeased him: assertion and repetition, the word authoritarian and stereotyping. (PERRONE-MOISÉS, 2017, p.7)

Writing Degree Zero and *Lesson* point to a distribution of the sensible guided by the possibility of realizing a life free from the paradigmatic and crystallized structure of the doxa. The distribution of the sensible is understood as a community experience, a common way of

experiencing reality by a group of people who share not only tasks, but values and sensibilities in common. Thus, in understanding the literary phenomenon as a utopia of language, Barthes is also proposing another sharing of the common, a possible society that has delicacy and benevolence as principles.

In "Triumph and Breaking of Bourgeois Scripture" the second part of *Writing Degree Zero*, Barthes shows how the utopia of language is linked to a historical process, in that each of the scriptures is the fruit of a determined epoch in time and space, even though it bears the marks of earlier ways of saying. According to this perspective, the bourgeoisie was able to create a literary scripture whose ideological unity guaranteed to a certain extent a harmonious vision of the world that would later begin to collapse.

Barthes' work shows how writing was shattered in late modernity, expressing the tearing up of bourgeois consciousness, a period in which the bourgeoisie moved from the phase of revolutionary consolidation to a reactionary phase in which social contradictions intensified, shattering the previously crystallized way of conceiving the world and opening space for the democratization of writing.

We will see, for example, that the ideological unity of the bourgeoisie produced a unique scripture and that in bourgeois times (that is, classics and romantics), form could not be torn apart, since conscience was not; and that, on the contrary, from the moment the writer ceased to be a witness to the universal and became an unhappy conscience (around 1850), his first gesture was to choose the engagement of form [...]. Classical writing exploded then, and all of Flaubert's literature to this day became a problem of language. (BARTHES, 1986, p.118)

Starting from the hypothesis that bourgeois enunciation is currently shattered along with the torn conscience of the modern subject, it becomes possible to delineate the moment when – in an attempt to escape its fragmentation – scripture began to express an "incorporeal" scripture text, based on the absence of the sign; states of scripture which Barthes calls "degree zero" or "white writings":

[...] The scripture has thus gone through all the states of a progressive solidification: first object of a look, after a deed, and finally of a murder, it reaches today a last avatar, the absence: In *The Neutral* scripture, here called '*Writing Degree Zero*', one can easily discern the very movement of a denial and the impotence to realise it in a duration, as if literature, tending for a century to transmute its surface into a form without heredity, only found purity in the absence of any sign, finally proposing the realisation of this orphic dream: a writer without literature. (BARTHES, 1986, p. 119)

Thus, the internal logic of Barthes' essay points to the development of a concept of *Neutral* writing also called by Rancière, in *The Politics of Literature*, as "writing without a father" that will complete the process of tearing apart bourgeois consciousness. This process will only be effectively overcome at the moment when the utopia of language is realized in its revolutionary and democratic plenitude through a social transformation capable of breaking with the fascist paradigm of linguistic functioning, at the moment of the advent of white writing.

Being eminently historical, *Writing Degree Zero* links the utopia of language to a revolutionary state in which Western society would realize the dream of scripture in communion with freedom, a kind of distribution of the sensible that has the literary system as a model. In this sense, the degree zero would reveal the effort to overcome the tearing of consciousness:

There is, therefore, a double postulation in all present scripture: there is the movement of a rupture and that of an advent, there is the very design of every revolutionary situation, whose fundamental ambiguity is that the Revolution must remove from what it wants to destroy the very image of what it wants to possess. As modern art in its totality, literary writing brings with it, at the same time, the alienation of History and the dream of History: as Necessity, it attests to the tearing up of languages, inseparable from the tearing up of classes: as Freedom, it is the consciousness of this tearing up and the very effort to overcome it. (BARTHES, 1986, p.167)

Utopian language and white writing, however, are not exclusive to the vanguard authors cited by Barthes in *Writing Degree Zero*. At several moments in his career, the author carries out in his own discourse enunciative operators capable of recreating a benevolent language that has calm as a vanishing point. According to Leyla Perrone-Moisés:

Barthes always used language operators to make the enunciation lighter: parentheses, quotation marks, incised ("I think"), successive two points in the same sentence to leave it open, etc. Thus, by his reflection and by his practice, he invited us to be attentive to the discourses, not only those formulated by others, but above all to our own discourses. His teaching project was obviously a utopia. (PERRONE-MOISÉS, 2017, p.8)

As explained, the work in question shows to what extent *Writing Degree Zero* is an imperative related to the historical development of scripture, a temporal necessity to overcome the process of alienation in the language perpetrated by the dominant ideology designated by the *doxa*.

2.2 The utopia of language



In *Writing Degree Zero*, it is possible to show how the advent of a linguistic utopia ties in with the historical process of human society, with its contradictions and ideological struggles, in search of an expression capable of freeing language from its intrinsically oppressive linguistic structure. In the same way, *Lesson* makes itself relevant to understanding to what extent the political approach to the utopia of language should be made not only in the field of ideology, but of form; since form is also value.

The accompaniment of the Barthesian argumentative exhibition in the inaugural class allows us to understand the utopia of language not only in its ideological character, but also and above all, in its formal aspect. For Barthes, the really free enunciative expression would be linked to a form capable of liberating what is said from power relations crystallized in the structure of language.

However, in seeking a mode of free expression of the field of influence of power, he encounters a contradiction or impossibility not delineated in *Writing Degree Zero* and which in the *Lesson* appears as problematic, namely: the inherently fascist character of the language.

But language, as the performance of all language, is neither reactionary nor progressive; it is simply: fascist; for fascism is not to stop saying, it is to force saying. As soon as it is uttered, even in the deepest intimacy of the subject, language enters at the service of a power. In it, infallibly, two rubrics are delineated: the authority of assertion, the gregariousness of repetition. (BARTHES, 2007, p.14)

At this moment, the impasse unveiled in the whole scriptural process is outlined, since language – for the very reason of its structure – always enters at the service of a power. In relation to this, Barthes states:

In language, therefore, servitude and power are inescapably confused. If we call freedom not only the power to subtract oneself from power, but also and above all the power not to submit to anyone, then there can be no freedom but outside of language. Unfortunately, human language is without an exterior: it is a closed place. One can only get out of it at the price of the impossible. (BARTHES, 2007, p.14)

Barthes thinks of literature from the mechanism of functioning of the "utopian function" that – although it is present in almost all literary discourses – can be found in emphasis in a specific type of modern writing, known as white writing, which refers to the ideal of *The Neutral*. This utopian function is a form of distribution of the sensible that also presupposes a utopia of language and, therefore, of society:

This function, perhaps perverse, therefore happy, has a name: it is the utopian function. Here we find history. For it was in the second half of the 19th century, in one of the most desolate periods of capitalist unhappiness, that literature found [...] its exact figure: modernity – our modernity, which then begins – can be defined by this new fact: in it utopias of language are conceived. (BARTHES, 2007, p.14)

Thus it is understood to what extent historical processes are linked to language through a history of writing that develops towards the utopia of language. In this sense, "To change language, a Mallardian expression, is concomitant with 'To change the world', a Marxian expression" (BARTHES, 2007, p.23).

Therefore, it is possible to affirm that the utopia of Barthesian language is linked to an ethical ideal of civilization in which language ceases to be at the service of a power and – finally – to be at the service of humanity, demonstrating that the political perspective, after all, is inescapably linked to the utopian side of the literary and linguistic phenomenon.

Barthes gradually outlines the basis of the linguistic techniques perpetrated by discourses that aim at the utopian function of language; techniques that mobilize displacements capable of diverting discourse from the crystallized structure of language, seeking an anarchic horizon in which language rebels against signs, plays with them, tensioning to destroy them. Such techniques correspond to linguistic procedures capable of subverting meaning and making enunciation lighter, as will be possible to observe throughout this article in a more attentive manner.

There is no other way out for this author than displacement – or stubbornness – or both at the same time. "To be stubborn means to affirm the irreducible: that which, in him, resists and survives the typified discourses that surround him. Stubbornness means, in short, to maintain against and against everything the force of a drift and of a wait. And it is precisely because it is stubborn that the scripture is moved" (BARTHES, 2007, p.26).

However, the ways in which language is stubborn are not only in the abstract field. It is possible to verify such stubbornness by analyzing how the semiological elements articulate themselves in literary writing. To this end, one must understand how Barthes comprehends the subversion of the system of semiology through processes of neutralization.

2.3 Elements of Semiology



In relation to *Elements of Semiology*, we have the systematization of the theoretical framework exposed based on Barthesian semiological understanding. The work – which is actually nothing more than notes from classes systematized by Barthes – can be seen as a support to the understanding of the semiological elements involving the system of linguistic expression that utopian language comes to disassemble.

It is hypothesized that one of the ways to realize the discourses of the utopian function of language is linked to the mobilization of the neutralization processes perpetrated by *The Neutral* scriptures. To understand them, it is therefore necessary to show how the linguistic mechanisms of neutralization of the system work.

To do this, it is important to stick to the system to understand it correctly. According to Barthes, the linguistic system is formed by paradigms, which means to say that language works with oppositions and similarities capable of underpinning the process of word meaning:

The system is the second axis of language. Saussure saw it in the form of associative fields, some determined by an affinity for sound (teaching, armament), others by an affinity for meaning (teaching, education) [...]. The terms of the field or paradigm must be similar and dissimilar at the same time, and contain a common element and a variant element: this is the case, on the significant level, of teaching and armament and, on the level of meaning, of teaching and education. This definition of the terms in opposition seems simple; however, it raises an important theoretical problem; the common element to the terms of a paradigm figures, in fact, as a positive element (not differential). (BARTHES, 1996, p.74-75)

The careful reading of the work allows us to observe to what extent the paradigmatic system works by mobilizing oppositions so that a certain term can be decoded. From this consideration, one can understand how *The Neutral* scripture, in this sense, is designated precisely by Neutralizing such oppositions, dismantling the paradigmatic logic that prevails in the language system.

In order to give an account of the main facts of the system, it remains to say two words about neutralization; this term designates, in linguistics, the phenomenon by which a pertinent opposition loses its relevance, that is, it ceases to be significant. In general, the neutralization of a systematic opposition takes place under the effect of context: it is therefore, in a certain sense, the syntagma that nullifies the system. (BARTHES, 1996, p.86)

The phenomenon, far from occurring only in literary discourses, are also present in other discursive fields, such as fashion, which often establishes two opposing signifiers for a single meaning, as a model of dress that is suitable for both day and night. With this in mind, one

realizes that neutralization alone is not capable of establishing the utopian function, insofar as fashion is not necessarily committed to freedom.

Finally, it is possible to understand that neutralization is only at the service of language liberation when writing is able to mobilize it in the field of discourse, as will be seen in the seminar *The Neutral*, a moment in which Barthes mobilizes the concept in the field of discourse through stylistic figures that refer to an ideal in which language rests from the empire of dichotomous senses.

2.4 *The Neutral*

As noted, the last production to be dealt with concerns *The Neutral* seminar given by Roland Barthes, a seminar which relates to all the issues raised above. It is a creative stylistic exercise in which Barthes mobilizes figures capable of exemplifying his ideal of the neutral.

The figures, which shake the structure of the linguistic system, prevent the paradigmatic crystallization of meanings, creating metaphors that spark the hope of a white or innocent language, far from all kinds of arrogances that long ago fossilized human expression.

For example, Barthes mobilises 'silence' as a figure capable of establishing the neutral. In this figure, the author shows how silence constitutes a paradoxical character in that, on the one hand, it cheats the paradigm and, on the other, it is recovered as a sign. In any case, silence is interested in the elusiveness it establishes in relation to the paradigm of meaning, a moment in which Barthes refers to what had already been formulated in *Writing Degree Zero*:

We find here a process that has already impressed me in *Writing Degree Zero* and that has since become a fixed idea: what is produced against the signs, outside the signs, what is produced expressly not to be a sign is very quickly recovered as a sign. This is what happens with silence: one wants to respond to dogmatism (the heavy system of signs) with something that cheats the signs: silence. But silence itself takes the form of image, of more or less stoic, "wise", heroic or sibiline posture: it is a pose – fatality of the sign [...] (BARTHES, 2003, p.58)

As a laboratory it is, the filing of the course is not able to schematize the sense of the neutral, since the fragmentary form in which it is uttered prevents any kind of theoretical systematization, even though the neutral is shown in all the figures as expressive modes of suspension of judgement, in which language reaches a kind of satori: understanding that resembles a kind of illumination devoid of opposition.

The ideal of the neutral can therefore be seen as a moment in which the paradigmatic structure of language is suspended, revealing, in a certain way, a neutralization at the level of significance that prevents the sense of fixing. In the absence of systematizations, Barthes resorts – in the "Argument" section – to a presentation of the neutral capable of showing more clearly how such ideal prevents the paradigm from consolidating itself:

I define Neutral as that which cheats the paradigm, or rather, I call Neutral all that cheats the paradigm. For I do not define a word; I name one thing: I gather under a name, which here is Neutral. Paradigm is what? It is the opposition of two virtual terms of which I update one, to speak, to produce meaning [...] the paradigm is the motive of meaning; where there is meaning, there is paradigm, and where there is paradigm (opposition) there is meaning. (BARTHES, 2003, p.17)

Thus one can conclude that by mobilizing neutral scriptures or discourses guided by the ideal of "neutral", one is also deceiving the very meaning as conceived in Western society. Therefore, this ideal appears as the attempt at a structural articulation that is not based on the paradigmatic system, which is also a way of conceiving a new system.

3 Barthes' project

3.1 The philosophical step of Roland Barthes

As for the commentators of the Barthesian work, the reading of *Le pas philosophique de Roland Barthes* [The philosophical step of Roland Barthes], Jean Claude Milner, helped to think about what the notion of *Neutral* can be understood as a category of idea. In according to Milner, Barthes often translates adjectives into nouns, using them as a "concept", just like does with *Obtuse* – and especially – with *Neutral*.

Dans l'effet-Barthes, la majuscule pare a ces hésitations. Elle force l'identité à soi du référent, en la nouant à l'unicité de l'Idée. Invité à ralentir, le lecteur comprend désormais pourquoi; c'est qu'il doit prendre garde qu'il a affaire à de l'Un. À chaque occurrence du mot, le lecteur saura tout à la fois qu'il s'agit de l'Idée et du retour de l'Idée, infiniment identique à soi. Un usage, en lui-même ordinaire, de l'article reçoit ainsi de la majuscule une univocité nouvelle. [...] Comparable à la majuscule des noms propres, elle distingue un référent unique et en souligne l'identité à soi, maintenue dans la multiplicité

indéfinie des apparitions lexicales; elle souligne du même coup que ce référent unique est une Idée. (MILNER, 2003, p. 16-17)¹

This is an important question, as it shows how Barthes mobilizes some names to embody ideas that were not named by the linguistic system. Speaking of *Neutral*, of this trick, Barthes creates a category to account for several sensitive phenomena outside the system of meaning, such as silence and delicacy. For Barthes, the Neutral is “whence the idea of a structural creation that would defeat, annul, or contradict the implacable binarism of the paradigm by means of a third term” (BARTHES, 2003, p.17).

In this sense, the essayist makes reference to several figures that refer to each other an idea of *Neutral* existence capable of breaking with the paradigm fascist language, which compels us to exist in a system of elements that exclude themselves. In this sense, the intellectual operation that transforms the neutral into concept is also a philosophical order that brings together distinct phenomena that have in the characteristic of subversion of binarism as a common denominator.

Milner's article, therefore, has the advantage of revealing the Neutral as part of Barthes's philosophical system which on the one hand says it has had no philosopher as a guide; on the other hand, he did not let make the neutral a philosophical system that finds in literature its image and similarity.

If, for Barthes, literature is the linguistic phenomenon that cheats the authoritarian structure of the language, the Neutral is the literary phenomenon transposed in philosophical system upside down. Such an operation would allow the neutral to represent the literary system according to which Barthes understands him, a system based on a ethics of the right choice:

Our project is obviously not disciplinary: we seek the category of Neutral that insofar as it crosses the language, the speech, the gesture, the act, he body, etc. However, since our Neutral is sought in relation to the paradigm, to conflict, to choice, the general field of our reflections would be: ethics, elsewhere in the conflict of the paradigm [...]. I say more: a reflection on the Neutral, for me: a manner-a free manner-to be looking for my own style of being present to the struggles of my time. (BARTHES, 2003, p.20)

¹ “The Barthes effect, the capital letter hides these hesitations. It forces the referent's self -identity, binding it to the singularity of the idea. Asked to slow down, the reader now understand why; he must be careful that he is dealing with the One. With each occurrence of the word, the reader will immediately know what is the Idea and the return of the idea, infinitely identical with itself. An ordinary use of the article thus receives a new univocity from the capital letter. [...] Similar to the capital letters of the proper names, it distinguishes a single referent and emphasizes the identity of itself, maintained in the indefinite multiplicity of lexical appearances; It emphasizes at the same time that this unique referent is an idea” (MILNER, 2003, p.16-17,our translation).

Barthes' excerpt therefore reveals *The Neutral* as systematization philosophy of a political project guided by the ethics of delicacy, an ethics capable of to resist a world that demands an unthinking engagement at all times that tends to doxa and the crystallization of the senses mobilized by the gregariousness of repetition intrinsic to stereotypes.

It is clear to what extent *The Neutral* operates in concept the utopia of language that moves Roland Barthes' intellectual trajectory from the beginning of his career to the end of his intellectual career as critic and writer. In this way, one can see the realization of *The Neutral* as possibility of expressing a utopia at the same time existential and linguistic, since existence is based on language.

Like the haiku, *The Neutral* inserts in the horizon of Barthesian utopia the interest in linguistic forms that refer to the possibility of suspension of "Authority of assertion" and "repetition gregariousness", freeing the existence of alienation inherent to the dichotomous paradigm of language, which tends to crystallize meanings and the consolidation of dogmas.

No wonder, one of the figures mobilized by Barthes in the seminar of *The Neutral*, satori, is related to haiku. For Barthes, satori is precisely the suspension of meaning achieved through the void experience provided by haiku. According to Perrone-Moisés:

But why the haiku now? Above all, due to the old tenacity of a Barthesian certainty: what makes language suffer is ideology. Our Western languages are tired of making sense, in circles vicious and addicted semantics. We come to a kind of engorgement, semantic bottleneck, where the senses are clash and self-cancel, in a historical-discursive situation that Barthes characterized it as 'semantic unhappiness'. (2007, p.91)

3.2 *The Neutral to come*

The reading of *Roland Barthes: Vers le Neutre [Roland Barthes: Towards The Neutral]*, by Bernard Comment, was by extremely important for the understanding of the Neutral as a phenomenon that represents the measure of the Barthesian ethical and aesthetic project when articulating the concept Neutral to all Barthes production.

Therefore, Comment's work allows us to glimpse, through the concept of Neutral, a whole project that matches moral and form, seeking to outline the general lines of a utopia that sees the ideal of a future expression that is also the search for both revolutionary and subtle distribution of the sensible where the neutral takes place not only in literature, but in life.

In this sense, the *Neutral* is the search for the realization of the utopian face of language, since, for Barthes, existence is only realized through the enunciation, since it does not exist outside the language and escape from language is impossible. In this way, the function of the intellectual would be to cheat the structure of the language, through language ways of saying that, under the hegemony of the bourgeois doxa, they have no space to exist:

Tâche difficile et précaire, impliquant une contorsion toujours liée à l'impossibilité (ou presque) de sortir du langage par le langage. La fonction de l'intellectuel est de critiquer le langage bourgeois sous le règne même de la bourgeoisie; il doit être à la fois un analyste et un utopiste, figurer en même temps les difficultés et les désirs fous du monde; il veut être un contemporain historique et philosophique du présent. [...] Et comment se regarder autrement qu'en se parlant?² (COMMENT, 2002, p.220/221)

It is also worth mentioning that neutral utopia is inseparable from the search for another way of conceiving life, where subjectivities would no longer be seen crushed by the linguistic paradigm that oppresses them. In this sense, the project Barthesian model permeates a political dimension, insofar as it is through the neutral that the subject would face the fascism of language that corroborates authoritarianism of power.

Thus, the *Neutral* can be read as a political project found in reinvention of the expression its engaged character. However, engagement Barthesian cannot be understood from the orthodox Marxist point of view, although with she dialogue. For Barthes, engagement lies mainly on the formal plane, since the form is also able to communicate by the way in which it is conceived.

Comment produire une littérature "engagée" (un mot démodé mais dont on ne peut se débarrasser si facilement) sans recourir, si je puis dire, au dieu de l'engagement, ne serait-ce qu'à l'état de lucidité, autrement que comme une problématique sartrienne, mais aussi un appel à la dépasser. [...] Entre impuissance et transgression, entre ineficacité et utopie, le Texte et l'écrivain vont chercher le mode possible d'une action, la plus radicale qui soit. Par le choix même d'une forme, d'un ton, "d'un éthos, si l'on veut", l'écrivain prend position, singulièrement, dans le champ du discours, et par extension, dans celui du langage, là où toute société découpe et construit son réel. (COMMENT, 2002, p. 223)³

² Difficult and precarious task, involving a contortion always linked to the impossibility (or almost) to leave from language to language. The intellectual's function is to criticize bourgeois language under his own domination of the bourgeoisie; he must be both an analyst and a utopian at the same time to represent the difficulties and crazy desires of the world; he wants to be a historic contemporary and philosophical of the present. [...] And how does it look different than talking to each other? (COMMENT, 2002, p.221, our translation)

³ How to produce "engaged literature" (an unfashionable word of which you can't get rid of easily) without resorting, if I may say so, to the god of commitment, even if only in a state of lucidity, otherwise than as a Sartre problem, but also a plea to overcome it. [...] Between impotence and transgression, between ineffectiveness and utopia, the Text

At several points, Comment shows how the reinvention of the symbolic is a political task. This task is not to be confused with a radical undertaking to ruin the structure of the language; it is about, rather, to gradually pressure the change of the symbolic system through the formal plane. This change does not happen with the practice of linguistic terrorism, but by means of subtle seismic movements perpetrated by figures that activate the *Neutral*, mobilizing, in the speech, a kind of satori capable of suspending the briefly felt.

As Barthes himself explains, in a 1972 interview, the only subversion possible in terms of language is to move things around in order to return to language in a modified way, subverting it from itself. According with the essayist, bourgeois language permeates all social spaces and, therefore, there is no way to invent another language system right away, as the structure of the bourgeois language is the only one available and it is from it that the intellectual or the writer must leave to subvert the language.

L'écrivain (celui qui écrit et dénie les limites obligatoires de sa propre langue) a la responsabilité d'un travail politique; ce travail ne consiste pas à "inventer" de nouveaux symboles, mais à opérer la mutation du système symbolique dans son entier, à retourner le langage, non à le renouveler. [...] Dans un entretien de 1972 pour *Les Lettres françaises*, le ton semble gagné un certain découragement: [...] La seule subversion possible en matière de langage est de déplacer les choses. La culture bourgeoise est en nous: dans notre syntaxe, dans la façon dont nous parlons, peut-être même dans une part de notre plaisir. Nous ne pouvons pas passer dans le non discours parce que le non-discours n'existe pas. [...] Barthes affirme la nécessité de subvertir et non de détruire. (COMMENT, 2002, p. 226/234)⁴

In this way, the subversions proposed by *Neutral* are subtle, almost imperceptible, such as the exercise of delicacy, the use of silence, the practice of benevolence. At first, such figures seem harmless; however, it is to them that we owe the revolutionary power of the neutral.

Barthes warns of the danger of the revolutionary discourse only from a semantic point of view. For him, this speech can do nothing or little do in search of the reinvention of language, insofar as it ignores the character evaluative form. Intending to be revolutionary, this discourse

and the writer will seek the possible way of an action, however radical. By the choice of a shape, a tone, an "ethos, if you prefer", the writer takes a singular position in the field of speech and, by extension, in the field of language, where the whole society cuts and builds its real. (COMMENT, pp. 2002/ 223, our translation)

⁴ The writer (who write and denies the mandatory limits of their own language) is responsible for political work; this work does not consist of "invent" new symbols, but in operating the mutation of symbolic system as a whole, to return language, not to renew it. [...] In an interview 1972 for *Les Lettres françaises*, the tone seems to be conquered by a certain discouragement: [...] The only possible subversion in terms of language is to move things. Bourgeois culture is in us: in our syntax, in the way we speak, perhaps even in a part of our pleasure. We cannot enter the non-speech because non-speech does not exist. [...] Barthes afirma a necessidade de subverter e não destruir. (COMMENT, 2002, p. 226/234, our translation)

conceives the need to transform life from the point of view of the statement, but not from the enunciation, resulting in a supposedly progressive statement, but in a reactionary.

When looking for a third term, the procedure put in place by the neutral operates the subversion of language, because it dismantles the paradigmatic binarism of the language that dictates the rules of the ways of saying and feeling. The neutralization procedures change the world at the moment when the third empty form emerges, collapsing the binary system of making sense:

“[...] Marty is quick to point out that there are, behind the various nomenclatures – degree zero and / or *Neutral* – the search for a third way that escapes the binary model of creating meaning, “this third term that, in the articulatory game of language, refers, precisely, to the possibility of interrupting programming”, as he writes Leda Tenório da Motta. [...] The possibility of *The Neutral* breaks out in this model when it comes to interpose, from the polarity that exists between two terms, a third – a zero or *Neutral* term. That is, a third party element that comes to unlock the sense that is established from the binary relationship that the terms maintained in the previous system. (FONTANARI, 2018, p. 283-284)

Meanwhile, the contesting ventures that make use of the naive slogans do not get much beyond being absorbed in sense machine that they think to attack.

Ailleurs, dans le *Plaisir du texte*, Barthes reproche au discours destructeur (celui d'une certaine avant-garde) d'être "sémantique" et non "dialectique" et propose une "subversion subtile" qui esquiverait le paradigme pour chercher un troisième terme, non de synthèse on l'a vu, mais d'excès ou d'excentricité. Dans *Leçon*, c'est la naïveté de leur ton comminatoire qui est regrettée dans trop d'entreprises contestataires, lesquelles ne font jamais ainsi que participer (sur le mode de l'intimidation ou du contact frontal) à la machine du sens qu'elles croient attaquer. (COMMENT, 2002, p.235)⁵

Barthes's warning about the danger of the confrontation strategy is aimed at avoid the arrogance he has fought over the years. Without a doubt, the author stands against the bourgeois doxa that crystallizes the senses, preventing other ways of saying committed to life in all its vitality. Meantime, Barthes prefers indirect engagement through cheating and sliding, tactics without strategies that create cracks where you can breathe without the atmosphere of suffocation of the univocal senses:

⁵ Elsewhere, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes censures destructive discourse (that of a certain avant-garde) to be “semantic” and not “dialectical” and proposes a “subtle subversion” that would avoid the paradigm of seeking a third term, not of synthesis, as we have seen, but of excess or eccentricity. In *Lesson*, it is the naivety of his cominatory tone that is regretted in many protest ventures, which never do and participate (in intimidation or frontal contact mode) with the machine the meaning that they believe to attack. (COMMENT, 2002, p.235, our translation)

La frontalité, par sa violence, par son arrogance aussi, doit être attentivement évitée (car inefficace est dangereuse). D'autres gestes lui seront préférés. Ils pourraient esquisser ou définir autant de figures de la subversion, dont je choisis de donner un aperçu sous forme de catalogue (incomplet) plutôt qu'une théorisation, laquelle ne pourrait que manquer le caractère fugitif et multiple de ces tactiques sans stratégie en vue du Neutre. (COMMENT, 2002, p. 235)⁶

According to Comment, Barthes adopts procedures that aim to subvert the language through its own terms, that is, starting from discourse to better subvert it. According to this point of view, the intellectual's task is not to carry out the destruction of the linguistic system as it was conceived in the classes, since – for that – a revolution would be necessary. Assuming intrinsic limitation to the intellectual's work, Barthes understands the decomposition of bourgeois conscience its task par excellence, subverting it within its ideological and reactionary discourse.

Décomposer. Admettons que la tâche historique de l'intellectuel (ou de l'écrivain) ce soit aujourd'hui d'entretenir et d'accentuer la décomposition de la conscience bourgeoise; cela veut dire que l'on feint volontairement de rester à l'intérieur de cette conscience bourgeoise, il faut s'en absenter, et cette exteriorité n'est possible que dans une situation révolutionnaire: en Chine, aujourd'hui, la conscience de classe est en voie de destruction, non de décomposition. [...] (COMMENT, 2002, p.236)⁷

In this process of decomposition, the intellectual modifies the discourse measure that modifies itself, subverting the utterance itself and reinventing itself. This question is essential to understand to what extent the subject is transformed by transforming language into a dialectic that alters the subjectivity through enunciation.

Pour détruire, en somme, il faut pouvoir sauter. Mais sauter où? Dans quel langage? Dans quel lieu de la bonne conscience et de la mauvaise foi? Tandis qu'en décomposant, j'accepte d'accompagner cette décomposition, de me décomposer moi-même, au fur et à mesure: je dérape, m'accroche et entraîne. (COMMENT, 2002, p. 236)⁸

3.3 Writing Degree Zero, the other side of *The Neutral*

⁶ Frontality, for its violence, also for its arrogance, must be carefully avoided (because the inefficient is dangerous). Other gestures will be preferred. They could outline or define other so many subversion figures, that I chose to provide an overview in the form of catalog (incomplete), instead of theorizing, which could make the fugitive and multiple character of these tactics without strategy in view of the neutral. (COMMENT, 2002, .235, our translation)

⁷ Decompose. Let us assume that the historical task of the intellectual (or writer) today is to maintain and decomposition of bourgeois conscience; means that you voluntarily pretend to stay within that bourgeois conscience, it is necessary to be outside it, and this externality is only possible in a situation revolutionary: in China today, class consciousness is in the process of destruction, without decomposition. [...] (COMMENT, 2002, p.236, our translation)

⁸ To destroy, in short, you must be able to jump. But where to jump? In which language? On what place of good conscience and bad faith? While decomposing, I agree to follow this decomposition, to decompose, how and when: I slide, hold and follow. (COMMENT, 2002. p. 236, our translation)

Leda Tenório Motta and Rodrigo Fontanari show how the "writing degree zero", a notion used by Barthes to refer to the type of white writing put into practice in modern literary production, can be understood as the other face of Neutral. Both refer to a mode of enunciation that escapes the binary and rationalistic linguistic paradigm that prevails in bourgeois society and concern a typically Barthesian desire for exemption from meaning.

Therefore, Neutral is this kind of utopia of unmarked language or, in a way, this suspensive gesture of language that Jean Pierre-Richard called 'the zero degree of presence'. We can even say, following Leda Tenorio da Motta (2011), that the Barthesian operator is Neutral, and that already in that first Barthesian concept, the "zero degree", the prerogatives of Neutral are placed, of exit. (FONTANARI, 2018, p. 280)

In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, it is clear that when we speak of degree zero and neutral we are always talking about a "world that would be meaningless (like a military service). This began with degree zero, where one dreams of the absence of any sign; then a thousand affirmations of that dream (about the avant-garde text, Japan, music, alexandrine etc.)" (BARTHES, 2003, p.100)

In "The conception of emptiness in Roland Barthes", Rodrigo Fontanari discusses how the utopia of language related to *The Neutral* would already be linked to the *Writing Degree Zero*, since both notions put the semiotic system in collapse because of a discourse that seeks to rest from assertiveness, inventing forms of enunciation in which society would be able to rest from the univocity of signs.

Renamed Neutral – in its latest version, always written in capital letters – the references to "degree zero" are expanded to include more than just the wanderings of the French novel and the Brechtian theatre of critical distance. Other figures and counterfigures of "Neutral" are put on stage: on one side, Fatigue, Benevolence, Silence, Delicacy, and on the other, Cholera, Conflict, Arrogance, Response. Through these figures, Barthes seeks to repropose, under new clothing – as the Brazilian literary critic Leda Tenório da Motta observed – "that same self-critical collapse of the semiotic machine that is proper to zero degree scriptures". (FONTANARI, 2018, p. 278)

Specifically, the Degree Zero points to a utopian conception of literature in which literary writing would be linked to a historical process in which the bourgeois conscience would be with the days of contact, in the revolutionary imminence of a society to come in which literature would be the vanguard of a subjectivity safe from the legislation of language.

The degree zero would be, therefore, the historical form of literature that would set in motion the shattering of bourgeois consciousness. *Degree Zero* meets *Neutral*, since – to express the crisis of bourgeois ideology – it is necessary to put into practice neutralization procedures that produce a certain emptiness of meaning.

In relation to this, it is possible to perceive in the literary productions mentioned by Barthes as representative of late modernity an aesthetic of emptiness so welcome under the Barthesian point of view of language utopia. In this sense, it is possible to talk about the zero degree of writing as an aesthetics of the empty form, as avant-garde writers such as Mallarmé and Sollers have demonstrated so well.

All this Barthesian incursion into the universe of the sign and his incessant search for his "empty form" ended up having repercussions on his work, notably marked by a very peculiar and personal aesthetic conception, which he seemed to have intuited. We could even say that she was already drafted, in 1953, in the pages of *Writing Degree Zero*. This aesthetic represents distance and emptiness, an oscillation that goes through, in some way, all his work, but that finds its most finished form under the nomenclature of *Neutral*. (FONTANARI, 2018, p.280)

The aesthetics of empty form is a way to escape the saturation of senses produced by western society. This form of expression perpetrated by the *Neutral* and by *Degree Zero* in language ceases to produce the alienation of the myth, it does not serve the concealment of reality to reveal it in all its strength. In this process, language ceases to operate on the level of connotation to exist at its degree zero.

Both the *Degree Zero* and *Neutral* are, in a way, the symmetrical opposites of the "myth", since the latter is characterized by the kidnapping of the language that elaborates a second sense of the sign. The *Degree Zero* and *Neutral*, on the other hand, look for ways to collapse this symmetrical construction, taking the sign of the *Second Degree*, which is the connotation, to its "degree zero", the denotation. (FONTANARI, 2018, p. 282)

4 The morals of the form

According to Leda Tenório Motta, in *Barthes e seus primeiros toques de delicadeza minimalista [Barthes and his first touches of minimalist delicacy]*, "the writing as Barthes understands it is not situated in front of the world, but in front of the language itself, and does not do so without corrupting it in its value as a means of contact and understanding" (MOTTA, 2010,

p.236). This statement means that Barthes understands language as a form and it is through altering the ways of saying that the author wishes to transform the world.

For Barthes, language changes while questioning itself, always seeking non-alienated forms of meaning. It is in this sense that one can speak of a writer's responsibility towards form, since it is only through it that he can carry out the task of transforming the world and breaking with crystallized ways that, worn out, they can no longer say.

In outlining the notions of Neutral and Degree Zero, Barthes puts on various forms of expression, ways of saying that break with the binary and rationalist system of a bourgeoisie in crisis in the context of late modernity.

The more general theme is the writer's responsibility for his "form", or a "moral of form", as Barthes writes, disquietingly, starting from the preliminary idea of a disagreement between the writer and the bourgeois world, which forces him to mark this separation, to take note of the weight of his language, to inscribe, at last, this laceration in what he inscribes. (MOTTA, 2010, p.235)

According to Leila Tenório Motta, is flagrant the mirroring of themes between *Writing Degree Zero* and *What is Literature*, by Sartre. Barthes learns with Sartre to conceive literature by the history of its forms, developing a conception of the morality of the form that resides in all scripture. In this sense, one can see how the existentialist emerges as a decisive influence for the Barthesian project of language that articulates aesthetics and politics.

The responsibility, morality of form and – above all – the social domain are references in which the commentators of this first book agree to recognize Sartre's presence. Undeniably, this dimension of engagement marked by the "morality of form" is Sartrean, as well as this perception of art forms as historical and of the artist as the one who cannot not know historical. (MOTTA, 2010, p.234-235)

However, it is necessary to observe that Barthesian political engagement is antisocial in relation to Sartrean engagement, inasmuch as it does not meet society, escaping and deactivating what could reach it.

In this sense, the Neutral and Writing degree zero can be conceived as Barthesian notions that operate a detachment from bourgeois sociability, perpetuating the emptiness experienced by subjectivities that – when faced with empty senses – need to rebuild the world around them:

It is enough, however, to go deeper into the meanderings of *The Writing degree zero* so that notable differences, which already imprint the Barthesian

mark, leap into sight, allowing us to say that everything unites and separates Barthes from Sartre. In fact, if it is true that this shivering work is driven by the same passion as engagement, it should be noted that Barthesian engagement is, very paradoxically, antisocial. Since the society Barthes has in mind is not the one on which scripture must focus, but the one that scripture must completely repudiate, no longer acting on it, but rather, deactivating the very thing that would allow it to be achieved: the communication between the writer and the reader, even ideal. To write, in this sense, is to break the whole social circuit of the work. (MOTTA, 2010, p. 236)

With this in mind, it is possible to understand to what extent the moral conception of form is related to a project of transformation of the world by language. The Barthesian view that scripture corresponds to a form and that there is a history of forms that must be considered when speaking of language comes from Sartre and Marxism.

Conclusion

A distribution of the sensible

By transforming language from *Neutral* and *Degree Zero*, Barthes brings a new form of experience of the sensible through other forms of enunciation. In this regard, it is possible to say that *Neutral* and *Degree Zero* are based on a new form of distribution of the sensible that has in the morality of the form its reason, seeking an enunciation of charm and delicacy through "aesthetic acts as configurations of experience, which motivate new ways of feeling and lead to new forms of political subjectivity" (RANCIÈRE, 2005, p.11).

The definition given by Rancière of the distribution of sensible:

I call the distribution of sensible the system of sensible evidence which reveals, at the same time, the existence of a common one and of chunks which define places of respective parts. [...] This division of parts and places is based on a sharing of spaces, times and types of activity which determines exactly how a common one lends itself to participation and how both take part in this sharing. (RANCIÈRE, 2005, p.15)

With this in mind, Roland Barthes' bibliographical review carried out in this article points to the understanding of a type of distribution of the sensible based on the convergence relationship between Writing Degree Zero and Barthesian Neutral, in the sense of Rancière.

By the term aesthetic constitution one must understand the distribution of the sensible that gives shape to the community. Distribution means two things: participation in a common set and, inversely, separation, distribution in



quinions. A distribution of the sensible is, therefore, the way in which the relationship between a shared common set and the division of exclusive parts is determined in the sensible. (RANCIÈRE, 2005, p.7)

Finally, it can be said that *The Neutral* and *The Writing Degree Zero* establish new subjectivities that enunciate the construction of a new world free from the historical alienation perpetrated by the bourgeoisie in late modernity. In this sense, Barthes' utopia of language provides a new way of acting before the world, precisely for this reason, the constitution of a new world through a distribution of the sensible guided by Neutral.

This way – although separated by considerable time span – the Barthesian notions mentioned here point to a kind of distribution of the sensible that conceives the literary making as a free language utopia of the paradigmatic and crystallized linguistic structure of the doxa. Thus, by having literature as the ideal of all language, Barthes is also proposing a distribution of the common, a society we want.

Although the historical development of bourgeois consciousness is responsible for alienation, the enunciative laceration of consciousness is capable of instituting a new possibility of scripture, white scripture, based on a voiceless enunciation that will be responsible for the democratization referred to by Rancière in *The Politics of Aesthetics* and *The Distribution of the Sensible*.

Perhaps that is why it is possible to understand the *Degree Zero* script as one capable of founding another division of the sensible. It puts the reference of the enunciate and the identity of who enunciates in a condition of indetermination that allows a democratization of the word; a determination made possible by the advent of script:

What is at stake in these texts is a more essential complicity between a mode of discourse and a mode of community, between literality and democracy. There is democracy – and politics, consequently – because there are words left over, words without a reference and statements without parents that undo any law of correspondence between the order of words and things. The democratic desertion of community incorporation is in solidarity with the literary desertion of the incarnation. (RANCIÈRE, 1995, p.15)

In this sense, literature as a possibility for the realization of the utopia of language emerges as a destiny to be reached by any language that has the commitment to get rid of the power relations perpetrated by the logophonocentrism that links every enunciation to a father, to a voice whose authority over what is said is the maxim.

Writing is freed from the act of speaking which gives a logo its legitimacy [...] This is also why it is too talkative: the dead letter will roll from one side to the other without knowing to whom it is intended, to whom it should or should not speak. Anyone can then, seize it, give it a voice that is no longer itself, building with it another speech scene, determining another division of sensible. There is writing when words and phrases are made available, when the reference of the enunciate and the identity of the enunciate fall into indetermination at the same time. (RANCIÈRE, 1995, p.8)

Thus, language could only be realized as freedom for the price of the impossible and, even so, for a brief instant; a moment when white writing would break with the assertive and paradigmatic mechanism that characterizes the fascism of language, the becoming of *Neutral* or fatherless writing.

The democratic desertion of community incorporation is in solidarity with the literary desertion of the incarnation. Literature and democracy are two modes of invention that are almost corporeal or incorporeal, the mechanism of which weakens incarnations and the identifications that link an order of discourse to an order of conditions. This aesthetic community of separation is a political community of delegitimization. (RANCIÈRE, 1995, p.15)

Finally, it is understood to what extent artistic expression can be said to be responsible for putting life on the line and shaping another possible community, capable of seeing and interrelating subtly with the world. In this sense, the neutral announces the coming of another distribution of the sensible, one capable of respecting the delicacy of existence that bourgeois ideology subtracts.

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