Life and the mud: three cinematography seduced by memory
A vida e a lama: três cinematografias seduzidas pela memória

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Abstract: great news on TV; an experiment in virtual reality; a long-running documentary. Based on these three works, a reflection on the relation between cinematography and memory is proposed. The context is the set of facts and developments after the rupture of the Fundão dam, in the municipality of Mariana (MG), on November 5, 2015. Keeping an eye on the circumstances created to present human tragedies after they occur, this study focuses on how moving images give meaning to much greater goals than mere technical experimentation.

Keywords: cinematography; memory; device; trauma; life.

Resumo: uma grande reportagem exibida na TV; uma experimentação em realidade virtual; um documentário de longa duração. A partir destes três trabalhos, propõe-se uma reflexão sobre a relação entre cinematografia e memória. O contexto é o conjunto de fatos e desdobramentos posteriores ao rompimento da barragem de Fundão, no município de Mariana (MG), no dia 5 de novembro de 2015. Atento ao modo como são criadas circunstâncias para apresentar os dramas humanos vividos após a tragédia, o foco está no modo como as imagens em movimento dão sentido a objetivos muito maiores que a mera experimentação técnica.

Palavras-chave: cinematografia; memória; dispositivo; trauma; vida.

Introduction

On November 5, 2015, Brazilian news reported the information on the rupture of the Fundão dam, in the municipality of Mariana (MG). The dam was administrated by the company Samarco[2]. The news would uncontrollably spread in social media. Images captured by smartphones, after a short time, portrayed the devastating force of the mud that, at the end of its path, had run 600 kilometers until reaching the waters of the Atlantic Ocean. In some hours, it was already known that it was an environmental disaster, an indisputably criminal one, unprecedented in the country. The tailings resulting from steel extraction created an avalanche that covered houses and people in mud. The biggest Brazilian environmental disaster caused, understandably, an imagistic phenomenon, which was presented, in its audiovisual form, under many variations. Ranging from recordings made by inhabitants and the company's employees in the heat of the moment up to takes recorded from helicopters of communication companies, the strategies used to reveal the developments of the occurrence were many, in the form of moving images.

This regards the coverage of the fact, since, if the observation spectrum is widened, it will be possible to verify the intensity of the audiovisual development throughout the 12 months after the fact. Great TV reports, TV documentaries or by film producers and experimental filmmakers are some of the ways and formats that conferred visibility to the developments after the destruction of the communities located by the Doce River, crossed by the mud. In many of these works, it is possible to see how much the destruction of such dearest places for river-based populations has affected the socio-historical dynamics of many families who lived there for generations. One can wonder, thus, how much have the affected people been harmed, beyond material conditions. It is indisputably true that the first impact, when seeing the images of destroyed communities, is part of the material prejudice. However, when looking at a parallel dimension, it is possible to see affective ruins, related to the harms that destroyed photo albums, framed pictures,

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[2] Samarco Mineiração S.A. is a Brazilian mining company founded on 1977. Its acting on the market is characterized by the exportation of iron ore materials, used as the raw material for the steel industry in American, Asian, European, and Middle-Eastern countries. According to data from the company's official website (http://www.samarco.com/a-samarco), Samarco has two operational units: Germano, in Mariana and Ouro Preto (MG), where steel extraction and processing was performed in three concentrators, and Ubu, in Anchieta (ES), where four pelletizing plants are located, performing the process of compressing and molding extracted steel and feeding the furnaces of the steel industries.

objects of great regard for the people who had these tools as the main device for remembering experienced moments.

It is clear that, in face of this tragedy, the posture of the social environmental – in this case, represented by the audiovisual making –, follows the one adopted in face of great human and material losses: it arises a remembrance will, characterized by the memory culture raised against an oblivion policy (HUYSSEN, 2000, p. 16). It is based on this that Andreas Huyssen suggests reflecting on the meaning conferred to memory in Western societies, specially thinking on the memory developments around the Holocaust that exterminated Jewish populations in Europe or even on dictatorial regimes in Latin America during the 20th century. The tone suggested by the author moves this reflection, here destined to understand three different ways of audiovisual experiences in contact with the scenario of mnemonic losses experienced by the communities of Minas Gerais affected by the tailings of steel exploration. Undoubtedly, the interest lies on understanding the narrative structure used by different audiovisual formats to deal with destruction. Still considering the dialogue to Huyssen, it will be possible to extract a certain pertinent understanding on what is proposed as the object of reflection: "We know that media does not transports public memory without bias; it conditions memory to its own structure and format" (HUYSSEN, 2000, p. 22-23).

Given the tone of the theoretical-argumentative orientation, it is important to say that three different experiences will serve as analysis samples in order to understand how memory was used as a device for the audiovisual discursive construction about the rupture of the dam in Mariana. Besides, the three audiovisual procedures place us in face of the possibility of analyzing the interaction between traumatic memory and visual memory.

Overflying the absence

An year after the rupture of the dam, on an special report aired in the program *Fantástico*, on October 23, 2016, a journalistic team of *Rede Globo* used a device that is well-known in its audiovisual constructions[3], this time to overfly the emptiness of the communities affected by the tailings of steel exploration (MARIANA…, 2016). An adventure pilot, Lu Marini, from a motor paraglider,

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[3] According to an off-camera text, this same strategy had been used in a flight over the São Francisco River and also over the Transamazônica highway.

equipped with three cameras, proposed to run the course of the Doce River since Mariana to its mouth on the sea (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The pilot Lu Marini overflies the Doce River.
Source: Frame extracted from the report aired on the program *Fantástico*, on October 23, 2016 (Mariana…, 2016).

The intervals between each point of the trip are characterized by conversations with inhabitants of some of the places where the pilot lands. Both the pilot and the reporter Ernesto Paglia lead the interviews, in an approach that seems dedicated and focused on trauma. The first moments of the constructions are characterized by the off-camera voice of some former inhabitants of the region, which appear along with a sequence of images of destroyed houses, objects hanging on trees that were taken by the mud, as the example of a photographic camera hanging on the branch of a tree. The visual memory constructed by this view is the approximation of people who, in the narrative elaboration, receive traces of characters. Naturally full of dramas caused by the abandon of their place of origin, most of the times, the speeches remind the viewer of a traumatic condition.

Interspersing images of the mapping done by Google with images registered after the destruction, the situation of that moment concerns, according to the reporter's speech, to a "phantom district", referring to Bento Rodrigues, which belongs to the municipality of Mariana. There, the first trauma presented, by the peoples' reports, is the one of the inhabitant Priscila, a young women that, when trying to escape the mud, miscarried her baby. Her interview, complementing what

the reporter says off-camera, regarding the official numbers totalizing nineteen deaths, is very meaningful: "When saying that, do not say nineteen. Count my child too. Twenty victims".

By listening the histories close, the overflying device seems to make more sense. In a Benjaminian perspective, memory, thus, ceases to be a tool to become the means itself:

> It is the medium of that which is experienced, just as the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. Above all, he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the "matter itself" is no more than the strata which yield their long-sought secrets only to the most meticulous investigation. (BENJAMIN, 2005, p. 576)

By approaching the drama with the camera at the people's eye level, the excavation procedure, taking the term from Benjamin, reaches a deeper strata, located in the humanity covered by the tragic. The lack, in this case, is intrinsically connected to Priscila, since a part of her was taken from her. Revolving this human terrain, if one can say so, is painful exactly because the result of said excavation leads to the feeling of emptiness. And, in face of the metaphor stablished, in this appropriation of Benjaminian terms, beyond the overflight, it is necessary to listen to the land, in order to find what is really lacking after the tragedy, since it is "no less indispensable is the cautious probing of the spade in the dark loam" (BENJAMIN, 2005, p. 576).

The second story found by the team reinforces the need for such archeological procedure, When meeting Sandro, a former inhabitant that had his house and commerce in the town, words are followed by desolated tears: "So, my whole life was to live here. I couldn't imagine getting out of here. I couldn't. I always come here to remember the past, see?" – says the former inhabitant. The interview is followed by images of destroyed classrooms that are presented in a context in which even the ruins, which now serve as a space of memory, are threatened with disappearance, since the main project of damage reduction is to construct a dike in Bento Rodrigues, to avoid more tailings being taken to the Doce River, which will flood most of the village. The decision is being disputed by the Public Ministry of Minas Gerais, through a judicial action, demanding other solutions to be analyzed.

Strengthening the discourse on the consequences of the ruins is, thus, part of a force dispute in the area of memory. Remembrance is a precious material for former inhabitants against the imposition of a damage reduction foreseen by Samarco. On the other hand, the imminence of obliviating these reminiscences, since much of what is left would submerge after the construction of a dike, works as a justification for the camera to go through the spaces of memory. The partial conclusion reached, in this case, is that the camera surrenders to the possibilities of aesthetic exploration of the tragedy, specially due to the ability of making the device overfly, in a technological combination that characterizes a period of multiplication of portable cameras in use of action images, such as GoPro cameras. Also related to it is the considerable reoccurrence of drones, in a time characterized by the exploration of imagistic boundaries in high altitude takes. Without dissociating technology and the wish for memory, inspired by Andreas Huyssen (2000), it is possible to follow, on the same note, aiming to understand how much is the wish for memory also related to aesthetic objectives.

360° emptiness

The crossing between memory and technology is explored, in the selected set of works, under another view in the virtual reality movie *Rio de lama: a maior tragédia Ambiental do Brasil* (Mud river: the biggest environmental tragedy of Brazil), directed by Tadeu Jungle (RIO…., 2016a). The version available at YouTube offers a 360° experience, in which the interaction happens in a click with the mouse. As the off-camera voice appears – be it the narrator's (the director himself), be it the voice of former inhabitants –, through images, one can see people walking through the degraded areas. It is as if the spectator could experience the feeling of walking the streets and areas destroyed by the mud coming from the Fundão dam. This feeling matches the objective presented by the director himself:

> It makes sense to make this movie in virtual reality because they say that […] virtual reality movies are the biggest empathy machine ever created, that is, empathy is in the place of others. The idea to take the spectator to Bento Rodrigues, as if they were there, stepping on the mud and looking at the former inhabitants as they tell their history, sing songs, while they have the ability of seeing all the devastated land around, the sun shinning and all the life that was once there and it is not anymore, this seems to be a well-done use of virtual reality. (RIO…., 2016b)

The director was, at the time, studying virtual reality and identified, in the tragedy of Mariana, a justifiable opportunity for using the technology as a narrative resource in order to achieve the human dimension that really mattered. A month after the rupture of the dam, they went to Mariana and, followed by an inhabitant, went through the places without a documentary script, developing a device:

> I will counterpose sweet moments, these memories that people have, with the devastated place. So I took some of the inhabitants back to Bento Rodrigues, back to the devastated town, and they narrated their experiences, their memories in the place they are. (RIO…., 2016b)

The camera fit to register 360° images was placed so to give an idea of how the surroundings of the inhabitants' houses are now. More than that, the strategy takes the spectator to a space of imagination, in which they are invited to construct how life happened there. As the reports unfold, the memories brought to life and narrated get stronger. The experience recalls the suggestion of the philosopher Gaston Bachelard, who presents, as an auxiliary resource to psychoanalysis, what he calls topoanalysis (BACHELARD, 1978, p. 202). Fitting to what Bachelard has thought (1978, p. 222), a house is read, a bedroom is read, as if they wanted to say that the bedroom and the house are diagrams of psychology. The shock to which the spectator is submitted, however, is caused by the emptiness seen when looking at the image in virtual reality. In the lack of a spatiality, as described by former inhabitants, with the taste of their memories, the spectators build, imaginatively, the place corresponding to the reports with their own references of houses, porches, shelter places. This is what makes the exercise of otherness much deeper, in this sense, given that the spectators put themselves in the place of those who lost their homes, this big picture that, in Bachelardian terms, reveals a soul state (BACHELARD, 1978, p. 243). The sudden rupture caused by and creating the mud avalanche, in this sense, promotes an interruption that will certainly leave scars. A passage of the narrators text that leads and marks the narrative's tone seems to corroborate, in other words, to what is said:

> The inhabitants of Bento Rodrigues live, today, an emotional situation that is similar to the one of war refugees, since they had to escape in face of imminent danger and have left all behind. But the case here is worse. They know they will never return to their houses again. There is no hope. All that is left is memory.

The experience of virtual reality, thus, has a role of trying, in a complementation game, to rebuild the scenery. The process is guided by a camera that dives into the emptiness creating images that gain affective connotations through off-camera voices that narrate the daily life experienced in the universe of the house.

Figure 2: Dona Irene and Seu Zezinho in the place where the house used to be.
Source: Frame extracted from the movie *Rio de lama: a maior tragédia ambiental do Brasil* (2016a).

It is certainly a highlight of this resource the passage in which Dona Irene and Seu Zezinho play and sing in the place where it used to be the porch of the house they lived in (Figure 2).

> Here was our house, where we lived. Every Saturday, we took our instruments, the guitar, and sang on the porch, on this porch we are standing. And now we come to remember what has passed.

Besides Dona Irene and Seu Zezinho, numerous other situations face the space and the emptiness. Weberson, with a puppy on his lap and sitting on a fallen tree, with its roots showing; Dona Neneca at a street corner without buildings, even simple ones; Josi and Clarice in their house turned upside-down, the result of leaving in a hurry. The way takes are presented reminds the spectator once again of what Bachelard has called images of a *happy space* (BACHELARD, 1978, p. 196, author's emphasis). Facing the scenarios that emphasize so much what is vain, the philosopher's words are also used to reflect on how are vanished

rooms constituted as households of an unforgettable past? (BACHELARD, 1978, p. 196). The question is deepened while going through the whole movie and seeing characters in desolation. With the lack of a possible hope in face of the destroyed materiality, the director Tadeu Jungle thus takes this orientation and, in one of the texts he narrates off-camera, he points a path out: "In respect for the life that once existed here, in respect for those who died here, in respect for Brazil, it is essential to make Mariana a memorial, so that this tragedy is not forgotten nor repeated".

The device developed by the director and his team seems to work exactly because it manages to spark our imagination in the sense of perceiving how much was lost. By indicating the dimension of how the communities have been materially devoid, with deeply affective consequences, it evokes non-conformity, which makes us wish for a fair development. The wish for memory, in this case, shows its indispensability.

The album as a device

A saying by the Chilean documentarist Patrício Guzmán, at the beginning of the documentary *Memórias rompidas: tragédia em Mariana* (Broken memories: tragedy in Mariana) (2016), sets the rhythm of the movie: "The ones that have memories live on the fragile present; the ones that do not, do not live anywhere". The idea that memory is inseparable to life is also translated by the film construction, by the emphasis given to the losses and continuances related to family albums that were taken by the mud of the Fundão dam. The documentary's cinematography, for that reason, takes the spectator from the beginning to the space of a photographic lab, on the foreground. This atmosphere of developing pictures, as if trying to reinforce how much is the image registry indispensable for materializing memory, prepares the path for the way the team will approach interviewed people. Although the questions do not appear, it is supposed by the answers that, most of the times, the talk began around the lost photo album. The camera, then, listen throughout the movie. And it does the same thing when trying to stablish a game of reconstructing certain occurrences that are dear to interviewed people.

A first highlighted passage is certainly related to the testimony of the firefighter Selmo, who worked rescuing people and animals on the day the dam ruptured. From his whole speech, a moment that deserves attention in the documentary and for the analysis:

> Those are very simple people, right? People who had
> nothing. Then they came back with us to recover something
> and said: "hey, firefighter, I just wanted my picture, help
> me look for my picture". They were not concerned with
> the house, fridge, none of that. Just with those belongings
> that will remind them of their origins. Very simple people.
> (MÉMORIAS…., 2016)

The leading role of photo albums on the constitution of the documentary also counts with the participation of other characters. One of them is Euler Júnior, a photojournalist who, while telling the history of photographs he took when covering the tragedy, also reflects on what family photos mean for the maintenance of memory:

> Minas Gerais has this culture, right? Of old families,
> specially in the countryside, of preserving the images of
> ancestors, right? Of their grandparents, great-grandparents,
> so it becomes as a relic for the family. So, you can imagine,
> you lose all this document, this historical register that
> comes from one generation to the other. You lose your path.
> (MEMÓRIAS…., 2016)

Until here, it is already possible to perceive the material and, at the same time, sentimental sense conferred to the photographs. An issue that drew the attention of Susan Sontag, when writing the essential *On photography*. In it, she highlights that through photos, each family builds a visual chronicle of themselves – a portable set of images that testimonies for their cohesion (SONTAG, 2004, p. 19). In light of memory, taken as a patchwork quilted throughout time, albums thus take on an indispensable role for the symbolic organization of the family unit. The documentary device seems to be centered around it and it surrounds the album participation with different perspectives.

The camera position in *Memórias rompidas* is different from the two other regimes previously explored. In this documentary, the concern is to enter the places that are left. On the land ground, the photography direction goes through the place with the camera on the shoulder. Due to that, the camera goes inside schools to show chairs buried in mud, the names of students, the class schedule. It goes through places such as the club or Jairo's bar. It is guided by the device of developing photographs, as if trying to update what is in these images. In Paracatu, for example, at 70 km from Mariana, the camera follows Marino and Maria, inhabitants of the place, in visiting what is left of their home (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Maria and Marino visit the property where the family's house used to be.
Source: Frame extracted from the movie *Memórias rompidas: tragédia em Mariana* (2016).

After Marino showing a picture of the house where they had lived their whole life and that they had to abandon, the team follows the path and gets to the house. There, they remember some occurrences, such as their marriage and the party for Maria's parents' 50th anniversary. Among many matters, they talk about the photo album:

> There is a life history here. My parents' 50th anniversary was done here. Its photo album along with the video we had of the party, it was all kept inside the wardrobe. It is all gone. We cannot even remind it with pictures (MEMÓRIAS…., 2016)

The tone given to the documentary follows the tone of the loss itself, which justifies the incompleteness of the characters. Thinking on the disappearance of the picture registries of the family is to reflect on the condition they find themselves in, dislocated in space and time, having to reorganize their lives in time and space. It is perceived, in the speeches, that the inhabitants find themselves in a process of re-signifying things. The photos – this idea seems possible – have the same importance of the house's rooms and objects. The movie raises the photo albums to the status of basic and fundamental importance, reminding us, once again, of the critical review of photographic history made by Susan Sontag, and of its perception regarding the status achieved by this kind of album in the social family maintenance: During for at least one century, the wedding picture was as much a part of the ceremony as the prescribed verbal formulas (SONTAG, 2000, p. 18-19).

The almost archeological posture of the documentary also reaches two layers of the affective ruins found around Mariana. In the first of them, the team finds Vilma Gonçalves. The documentary director asks: "If you could save anything, what would you save?" The inhabitant focus on two memory objects: "I thought about saving the clothes she left the maternity in, my wedding album". Still helping to reveal the different variations of the leading role of family albums in this documentary, we find a passage of the testimony of the public prosecutor Guilherme Meneghin, who accompanied the first developments of the rupture of the dam: "People lost their life history. There were people that had one or two pictures of their deceased parents. They lost that and have no other reminder of their loved ones, of their children, of their relatives".

The documentary ends, by using these excerpts of interviews, playing a role of promoting a restitution to inhabitants. It never uses the discourse that this will fill any gaps and, on the contrary, it faces the hardships naturally resulting of the disappearance of memory objects. If one can talk about compensations, it happens in the imaginary plan. The camera and its strategies for presenting what is left of the places, in this sense, help to construct a narrative on the absence, and, for that reason, are justified and needed.

Memory, image and life

Paraphrasing a passage written by Didi-Huberman (1998, p. 83), the places recorded in the three works are made "alive" by picturing the absence. At first, each of the audiovisual works, on its own way, dedicate themselves to what is on the surface to, later on, dive deeply, with an archeological dose, on the scenarios developed after an unprecedented tragedy. The pulsing life is only found when the device is deepened. Walking back the path ran until now, it is possible to identify how each narrative strategy uses a device that allows to touch the surface of the devastated environment: an overflight, filming in 360°, or structuring a narrative by the thread of photo albums (a solid device), not counting on the vitality of the people who agree to talk to the camera. Those are three image regimes that, at first, serve as the entrance for a world of death, lack, absence, tears, but also of life.

This set of three works makes one reflect on the relation between memory and vital perspective through a view that is not only physiological. Understanding memory based on the destruction that has victimized communities in Minas Gerais in such different aspects seems to present justifications enabling to answer the question put by Andreas Huyssen who, carefully, asks:

> Is it the fear of oblivion that triggers the wish for reminding or is
> it maybe the opposite? Is it possible that the excess of memory
> in this culture saturated of media creates such an overload that
> the memory system runs in constant implosion danger, thus
> triggering the fear of oblivion? (HUYSSEN, 2000, p. 19).

What is endangered of oblivion, in said audiovisual set, more than the justice-impunity domain, is the way how life will be re-signified. With many objects of memory maintenance having disappeared, how does one recover it? If the life in community is made by the accumulation of memories and oblivions, how to find the community path again? When listening to the histories, the first and main feeling is of deterritorialization, posed as the main challenge for the said on-going reconstruction. Technology and its devices, which are used by the three works presented in analysis and description, work as a strata that is only excavated when the imagery structure that characterizes the device is transposed. Once again, it is necessary to recall Huyssen in the sense of listening to him regarding the way technological devices may subvert the order of importance in processes of handling memory:

> whatever the social and political causes for the explosive
> growth of memory are in its various sub-plots, geographies
> and sectors, one thing is certain: it is not possible to discuss
> personal, generational or public memory without considering
> the enormous influence of new media technologies as the
> vehicles for all forms of memory. (HUYSSEN, 2000, p. 20-21)

Confronting the idea raised by Huyssen with the technical-aesthetic documental experience of the three works, one must reflect on the authorial character of the approaches presented. Indisputably doted of creativity glimpses, they make one think on the effective correspondence between form and content, being important to understand if there is, in these experiences, an potential technical-artistical dilettantism. In other words, it is possible that such constructions deal, at some time, with the problem of the experimentation for experimenting itself. An idea that was abandoned here for identifying, in the analyzed works, the construction of an audiovisual discourse that brings forth the concern with human life in the foreground. This conclusion certainly motivates stablishing a approximation to an inspiring report by Georges Didi-Huberman who, in *Bark*, presents reports on his visit to Birkenau, a place that the directors of the Auschwitz camps decided, as it is known, to dedicate specifically to the extermination of Jewish populations of Europe (DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2017, p. 11). While narrating, he reflects on the numerous questions regarding the sense of memory being expressed as images mold personal memories

of traumatic events. One of the seems to be extremely pertinent to what is proposed here: There are images that are collective acts, and not mere private trophies or souvenirs (DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2017, p. 70). By sharing these utterances, all three works, each in its own was, stimulate the maintenance of life.

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