

## DOCUMENTARY AND THE CITY: REPRESENTING FRAGMENTS, FORMING VIEWS

**Maria Júlia Martins**  
**Luciana Roça**

**How to quote this text:.** Martins, M. J. S.; Roça, L.S., 2016. Documentary and the city: representing fragments, forming views. Translated from Portuguese by Luciana Santos Roça. *V!RUS*, [e-journal] 13. Available at: <<http://www.nomads.usp.br/virus/virus13/?sec=6&item=1&lang=en>> [Accessed 00 Month 0000].

**Maria Julia Stella Martins** is Pedagogue, MSc in Education, Knowledge, Language and Art and researcher at Nomads.usp. She investigates the field of contemporary arts body and its relationship with the urban public space.

**Luciana Santos Roça** is a Bachelor of Arts in Image and Sound, Master in Architecture and Urbanism and is a researcher at Nomads.usp. She studies sound interventions in public spaces, seeking to integrate the disciplinary fields of Sound Studies and Architecture.

### ABSTRACT

The video documentary enables the formation of understanding and approximations to the cities by being a method of approaching the urban dynamics and also its expression. This article discusses and reflects on the use of audiovisual, in general, and documentary, in particular, as a medium that broadens and contributes to the understanding of the city. Therefore, we bring to this context the results of the short course "Documentary and the city: critical thinking and experimentation", carried out through a collaboration between the Graduate Program of Architecture and Urbanism, Institute of Architecture and Urbanism, University of São Paulo, and the Graduate Program in Science, Technology and Society, Federal University of São Carlos, under the guidance of Professors Marcelo Tramontano and Arthur Autran, respectively. The documentaries produced by the participants are available for viewing at the end of this article, kindly provided by its filmmakers. By enabling perspectives and representations of the world, the documentary gives support to the understanding of urban dynamics, as well as provides opportunities to rethink the academic work, scientific divulgation and relations between Academy and Society and, finally, to promote a self-examination of the researcher-documentarist by the city.

**Keywords:** Documentary; City; Education; Research method.

## Documentary and city: overview of a proposal

When addressing issues about video documentary some narrative strategies come to mind at first place, conventional and traditional: a voice over, or a narrator making comments, often explanatory or descriptive; interviews; archival footage or pictures; as well as the notion that the presented material corresponds much more to the "real" than a fiction film. However, the variety of documentary's resources available to perform "representations of the world", as posited by Nichols (2001), surpasses those strategies that come to mind. As Bill Nichols (2001, p. 21) argues, "Documentaries adopt no fixed inventory of techniques, address no one set of issues, display no single set of forms or styles." The heterogeneity of documentary is noticeable since the first decades of film history, can be perceived in the musicality of the images in *Berlin, symphony of a great city*, by Walter Ruttmann, or the irreverence of *À propos de Nice*, by Jean Vigo; in contemporary Brazilian production we can cite documentaries such as the memorable *Playing* (Jogo de Cena), by Eduardo Coutinho, or *Hill of Pleasures* (Morro dos Prazeres), by Maria Augusta Ramos.

In addition to its rich and complex audiovisual language, the documentary is a way to think about the city through the discussion of its production, as well as a method to achieve a better understanding of the actions, dynamics and particularities of cities. Thus, the documentary is a method capable of expanding discussions towards the understanding of urban spaces with potential in the academic field. Despite knowledge areas such as Anthropology and Ethnography have been using documentary as a method for decades, Architecture and Urbanism usually do not involve the use of audiovisual and documentary in its classical methods of approaching and interpreting the city. This aspect made the occasion of this course a moment of experimentation and critical discussion, both on urban space and on the documentary narrative itself. In order to consider this discussion, the course "Documentary and the City: Critical Thinking and Experimentation" has as proposal to approach the disciplinary fields of Architecture and Cinema through the relation between city and documentary. The course occurred in the second semester of 2016 and was composed by graduate students from different knowledge areas, mainly related to Social Communication, Cinema and Architecture and Urbanism from both universities, University of São Paulo and Federal University of São Carlos.

The documentary becomes a locus of communication and discussion which has the potential to promote high levels of experimentation, providing information and debates that are difficult to happen while discussing other forms. To the Architecture field, specifically, the approach and dialogue with the Documentary broaden, densify and enrich ways that Architecture and Urbanism already have of record and representation of space with its particular contributions.

By having these aspects in mind, the documentary can be understood as a creative and sensible representation of the world we live in, a research method and also a form of interpreting. In general, the potential of documentary to academic research is to bring contributions to the debate that other forms or more traditional methods have more difficult to bring into discussion. The possibilities brought by the composition of moving images and sonorities extracted from the urban dynamics can produce very expressive audiovisual materials that allow to represent the city and its relations in a complex and sensitive way. They are compositions of tensions, presences, testimonies, actions, feelings, perspectives, perceptions and experimentations that hardly a written text could translate.

The production of documentary enables the representation of a fragment of the world where we live, a possible perspective on a piece of a given reality that presents itself to

the public as a critical and reflexive analysis on a certain phenomenon. The importance of the integration of film methodology in several fields of knowledge is recognized, in order to promote comprehension on different contexts and cultures, as Ramos and Serafim (2007) argue.

Thereby, during the course was sought to discuss and analyse how audiovisual can broaden the instruments for interpreting and expressing spaces by aggregating practices, meanings and understandings; not only for Architecture, but also for other fields of knowledge, enabling awareness and empowering the comprehension of a certain theme. It is considered that the approach between two distinct knowledge field enables the constitution of collective works and discussions that feed transdisciplinary methodologies based on diverse theoretical and practical contributions that, in turn, generate powerful production processes and knowledge sharing.

### **Documentaries, aesthetics and urban fragments**

The result given by the documentaries accomplished within the scope of the course was heterogeneous due to the represented aspects and urban fragments as well as the different aesthetic choices.

The documentaries can be found at the end of this text, however at the present time is relevant a brief presentation and synopsis of the same. Five documentaries were produced, published here with proper authorization of their filmmakers, presented in alphabetical order:

### **Demolitions**

Filmmakers: Nayara Benatti, Tássia Vasconcelos, Yasmin Bidim.



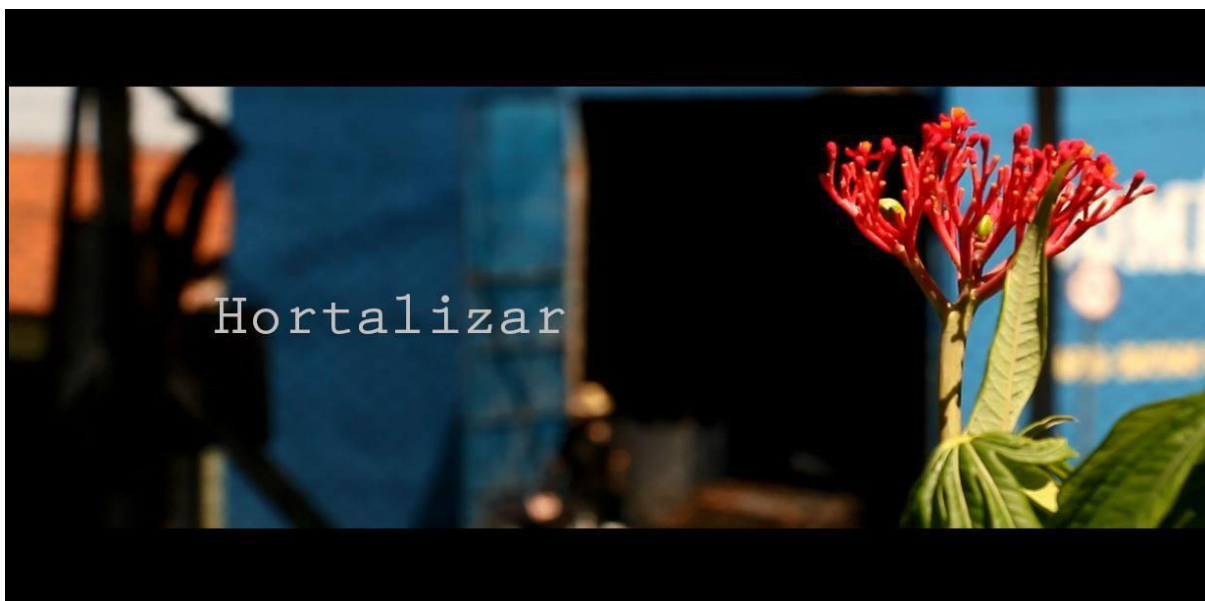
**Fig. 1:** Demolitions. Source: Nayara Benatti, Tássia Vasconcelos and Yasmin Bidim, 2016.

Synopsis: "Demolitions" is a documentary that discusses the use and, very often, the neglect about the old buildings in the cities, specially those located in city centres. These buildings are no longer seen for their historical value but rather as land for construction of newer buildings with aggregated value - several demolished houses give space for private parking lots, pharmacies and other commercial buildings.

The dismantled pieces, such as doors and windows, are sold to specialized demolition shops and then build new houses, giving a new use to those pieces of old buildings. You dismantle a city that mounts a new city; the former had a historical value, the latter has commercial value.

## Urban Vegetable Gardens

Filmmakers: Fernanda Ferrari, Mariah G. Di Stasi, Paulo Mendes.



**Fig. 2:** Urban Vegetable Gardens. Source: Fernanda Ferrari, Mariah Di Stasi, Paulo Mendes, 2016.

Synopsis: Cities are consolidated more and more, increasing its size and density. Cities increase mostly without adequate planning for the quality of life of their inhabitants resulting in spaces without adequate leisure areas and small housing lots. The suffocation caused by this development of urban areas causes a boredom in the population that is demonstrated in several ways.

The documentary Urban Vegetable Gardens presents one side of this demonstration, consolidated by communities and NGOs amid the dissatisfaction with market food and empty urban spaces resulted from real estate speculation, among other factors, forming a refuge.

## Route 58

Filmmakers: Juliana Trujillo, Luis Jorge Ocasitas, Rafael Baldam, Thiago Rodrigues.



**Fig. 3:** Route 58. Source: Juliana Trujillo, Luis Jorge Ocasitas, Rafael Baldam, Thiago Rodrigues, 2016.

Synopsis: Hop on a bus, cross the urban density and hop off at your destination. What city exists between the start and the end of this route? Or how many cities exist? The last stop is far away, it is the goal of those who work far from home, who devote hours of their day to overcome space and time of this path. The bus, the transportation, gathers, crowds, stops, it is insufficient. Moving throughout the city involves choices and needs; the user's view is superimposed on the municipal transportation system. The tension is imminent.

Observe the city through the camera lenses enables us to capture in details the experience of different agents that coexist in this system, making possible to record unpredictable actions that emerge from the relationship among them.

## Safe Place

Filmmakers: Giovanna Consentini, Jéssica Tardivo, Sandra Schmitt Soster.



**Fig. 4.:** Safe Place. Source: Giovanna Consentini, Jéssica Tardivo, Sandra Schmitt Soster, 2016.

Synopsis: Safe Place depicts sexual harassment situation in enclosed condominium environments, places usually considered safe compared to other residential models. To what extent a space, constructed and sold as a refuge, is really a refuge? To be imprisoned in a urban fragment, isolated, walled and extremely guarded is to take refuge from the evils of contemporary society?

## Friday at the square

Filmmakers: Luciana Roça, Maria Júlia Martins, Varlete Benevente.



**Fig. 5.:** Friday at the square. Source: Luciana Roça, Maria Júlia Martins, Varlete Benevente, 2016.

Synopsis: At the “Pigeons’ Square” in São Carlos, São Paulo State, many teenagers from different peripheral neighborhoods hang out on Fridays. The square becomes a temporary refuge in which young people create opportunities for socialization and entertainment in public space, a space very often denied to low income citizens in the peripheries.

By this brief presentation given by the synopsis it is possible to verify the diversity of themes and ways of approach. Such diversity was one of the course goals, corresponded by the participants.

Many aspects of the city was considered by the proposal of the theme “refuge” as mentioned by the authors Can Altay and Philipp Misselwitz (2009). The word, which has as common concept the impression of a safe place, is brought by its etymology that leads to a backward, retreat, escape from something that one wants to avoid. The authors (idem.) identify three common aspects in all refuges: a unsolved conflict, which causes a voluntary or forced displacement, such as expulsion or escape of aggression; spaces of refuge are settled by a border which clearly divides and alienates a certain territory, whether through physical or symbolic barriers; and, finally, refuges have their functioning marked by the suspension of existing rules, either spontaneously or compulsory. This concept of refuge does not regard a pessimism but leads to a different key of interpreting in which positive or negative aspects of the city can be understood.

The documentaries brought to discussion distinct aspects of the dynamics of São Carlos in which the notion presented by the cited authors of refuge can be observed. The topics discussed in the videos could be analyzed and debated among the participants.

When we film in cultural contexts and social environments different from those of the researcher it is necessary to fight against the stereotypes and preconceived ideas and develop an attitude of self-criticism (Ramos, Serafim, 2007).

In addition to expanding urban debates, this exercise made possible the reflection and experimentation of different ways of making documentaries. As a result we have accomplished documentaries that presented varied aesthetic choices that allowed discussions on the potentialities and limits that these choices can offer regarding to what one wishes to communicate and present.

Another discussion that deserves to be noticed and was reported by the participants regards the experiences and exchanges carried out throughout the course, as well as the importance of the process of documentary's production and its impact in their perceptions and practices as researchers-documentarists. Moreover, the filmmakers' recordings were permeated with surprises and unforeseen happenings, so the filmmakers found themselves faced with new actions that were not in the script. Therefore the filmmakers had to be resourceful and have skills to combine unexpected actions with their conception of documentary, understanding unexpected attitudes and also inserting it into their production.

According to the participants the field work for the recording of images and sounds was considered a quite rich situation of exchange of knowledge and information with the agents of their themes. Meeting the "others", the alterity present in the field experience produces tensions and reconfigurations in the researchers' conceptual limits, stimulating understandings that would not be possible without meeting and sharing with the local agents.

In the field, the researcher encounters unexpected elements and situation that were not thought in the initial script, meets characters and deciphers stories that belong to the universe of the city and record fragments of such complexity and variety of urban dynamics. By distancing themselves to elaborate an analysis and establish a montage, the documentarists elaborate an audiovisual discourse composed by their views and by what was found in the field. Within this perspective, the documentarist is not neutral when forming a representation of the world.

The documentaries were also perceived by the filmmakers as a powerful instrument to raise awareness and publicize a certain issue since the documentary is capable to reveal diverse occupations and dynamics of the city, complementing traditional research methods.

## **Good news**

An element that can be highlighted in contemporary context of the cities is the increasingly strong presence of information and communication technologies at many levels, especially those related to production and broadcast of videos due to the access of portable recording devices and social media. This demonstrates the need of actions that promotes critical thinking and opportunities for sharing and discussion. Therefore, the course's proposal covers innovation and access to information and knowledge. The act of gathering distinct graduate programs, combining different knowledge areas in an integrated way is an aspect that must be continued. The use of audiovisual and documentary to understand the dynamics of the city goes beyond its aspect of experimentation: it also is an expansion of research methods, dissemination of science, academic extension that brings closer relations between Academy and Society.





The combination of sound and image not only promotes levels of experimentation but is also a way of approaching the city and its complexity. The process of conception and inclusion of documentarists in a given context, the presence of technical equipment change the dynamics and bring other relations into play. Thus, being an observer of a certain context, the researcher-documentarist may have elucidations that bring approximations and understandings of what it was external to her/him at a first moment, also testing her/his own borders and refuges. In addition to this, the audiovisual production of documentary is also configured as an expressive language which is diffused to others. The audiovisual, especially documentary, introduce informations that is difficult to grasp by other more classic methods of research. The process of making a documentary itself includes research methods that carry distinct situation in which the documentarist is included.

Broadening research methods is necessary both in the research scope, in order to capture and understand dynamics that are more difficult to be perceived by other methods, as well as in the scope of dissemination. The latent need to meet dissemination of scientific development, as well as promoting academic extension activities can be promoted by the production and display of videos and documentary, bringing the academic community closer to society.

By forming views and enabling plural representations about various aspects of the world, such uses of the documentary act as a respite to combat such hard times. The pursuit of comprehension and understanding the other one and the self-examination to situate oneself in the world, both promoted by the process of production of a documentary or its appreciation, are very positive aspects given by this practice of creative representation of the world. Furthermore, the variety of media and languages is very precious to compose these representations.

## **Documentaries**

The documentaries produced for the course are available here with due permission from their filmmakers. English subtitles can be found in the videos.

### Demolitions

Filmmakers: Nayara Benatti, Tássia Vasconcelos, Yasmin Bidim.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OBl1yG5HcjA>

### Urban Vegetable Gardens

Filmmakers: Fernanda Ferrari, Mariah G. Di Stasi, Paulo Mendes.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HuAYGhJeoU>



Route 58

Filmmakers: Juliana Trujillo, Luis Jorge Ocasitas, Rafael Baldam, Thiago Rodrigues.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhvFaATWGE>

Safe Place

Filmmakers: Giovanna Consentini, Jéssica Tardivo, Sandra Schmitt Soster.

<https://youtu.be/g1iISp1qXyg>

Friday at the square

Filmmakers: Luciana Roça, Maria Júlia Martins, Varlete Benevente.

[https://youtu.be/NCbLTB\\_sSPk](https://youtu.be/NCbLTB_sSPk)

## References

Misselwitz, P.; Altay, C., 2009. Refuge: architectural propositions for unbound spaces. In: Rieniets, T.; Singler, J.; Christiaanse, K., ed., 2009. *Open City: designing coexistence*. Amsterdam: Netherlands Architecture Institute, pp.220-256.

Nichols, B., 2001. *Introduction to documentary*. Indiana University Press.

Ramos, N.; Serafim, J. F., 2007. Cinema documentário, pesquisa e método: desafios para os estudos interdisciplinares. *Revista Contracampo*, 17, pp.163-178. Niterói: UFF, 2007. Available at <<http://www.contracampo.uff.br/index.php/revista/article/view/358>> (Accessed: 16 June 2016).

*À propos de Nice* (1930) Directed by Jean Vigo [Film]. France.

*Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* (1927) Directed by Walter Ruttmann [Film]. Germany.

*Playing* (2007) Directed by Eduardo Coutinho [Film]. Brazil: Videofilmes/Matizar.

*Hill of Pleasures* (2013) Directed by Maria Augusta Ramos. Brazil/Netherlands: Nofoco Filmes, Key Docs.