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CINEMA NO HO CHI MINH: A PRÁTICA FÍLMICA COMO ENGAJAMENTO TERRITORIAL CINEMA IN HO CHI MINH: A FILMING PRACTICE AS A TERRITORIAL ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

Based on an experience of audiovisual production, this article aims to discuss the extent to which cinema can operate as a tool for territorial understanding and engagement. Taking as a starting point a film workshop held with young people and children of Ho Chi Minh, a rural settlement of the Landless Rural Workers Movement of Minas Gerais, we reflect on some methodological choices that contributed to the emergence of collaborative moments and greater autonomy between participants during the process. More than an analysis of the short film made, we are interested in contributing to debate on the issue of the method. We analyze how the process of filmmaking, from the creation of the script until the film's premiere, configures as a relevant method of spatial understanding and collective engagement, promoting the autonomy and socio-spatial mobilization of young people about their context.

Keywords: Cinema, Territorial engagement, Spatial knowledge, Collective mobilization.

1 Introduction

In this article, we will discuss how cinema can operate as a tool for territorial understanding and engagement.¹ We take as a starting point a film workshop developed with young people and children of Ho Chi Minh, a Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST) settlement in the state of Minas Gerais, southeastern Brazil. The workshop resulted in the production of the short film *A Procura*, which was carried out in a collectively and self-managed way. Developed by architects Aline Franceschini, Felipe De Brot, Iara Pezzuti, and Raul Lemos, the workshop's main objective was to address the demand, identified by young people, of strengthening the residents' socio-spatial mobilization. Hence, the workshop aimed to enable the emergence of collaborative moments and strengthen, in a certain way, the collective memory about the territory's organization through the production of a film. From the *methodological* point of view, the workshop sought to experiment with cinematographic practice as a result of an unpredictable process, opened to the unexpected and dependent on the physical and social conditions of which the participants were part of. Next, we will present the principles that guided the activities to achieve the workshop's goals, including mistakes and successes, and contribute to the discussion on methodological issues.

First, we present some important information about the Ho Chi Minh Settlement, which guided the workshop's processes and led us to choose the cinema as a potential tool for approaching young people and children. Later, based on discussions of several authors from the fields of cinema and anthropology, we analyze how the method we experimented with operated to strengthen the autonomy of these young people in conducting and creating their narrative about the place where they live. Finally, we bring some reflections on possible ways of seeing and experimenting with cinema as a tool for territorial rediscovery and engagement.

2 The Ho Chi Minh Settlement

Created in 2005 and located in the Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte, in the rural area of the municipality of Nova União, the Ho Chi Minh Settlement belongs to the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST). The settled families had already moved through several settlements and camps before residing in that territory. By that, they carry with them stories and life experiences from both the countryside and the city. .

United 15 years ago by the common goal of conquering a land where they could produce and guarantee the survival of their family, many dwellers still live in temporary houses and struggle to maintain their livelihood from agriculture, mainly due to the difficulty in accessing public policies and selling what they produce (Santos, 2019). The challenges of living in the countryside end up weakening the sense of collectivity built in the early years of occupation. It gradually established a process of social demobilization in which each family seeks its means of survival, either through precarious labor relations in town or by providing service to neighboring farmers. In this scenario, with few opportunities for life improvement in the countryside, many young people leave the settlement and go to the capital city in search of new perspectives and guided by promises of urban life as an alternative to the difficulties experienced in rural areas. This situation triggers a twofold effect process: in the countryside, it reinforces the rural exodus, aging of the settled population, and weakening of territorial bounds by the younger ones. In the city, it aggravates the challenges around their inclusion in worthy conditions of housing and work, so these migrants often end up again in precarious living situations.

Given this context, we proposed a series of workshops for young people and children of the settlement to investigate their relationship with the place. Workshops also aimed to identify collective interests that could foster future activities and contribute to *local territorial development* which, according to Saquet (2017, p. 20, our translation), is defined as:

The continuous movement of social (economic, political and cultural) and environmental achievements (recovered and preserved environment; adequate management of soil, plants, waters, and animals) for the majority of the population, the valorization of identities (historical-cultural heritage), participation, solidarity, cooperation, sharing [...]. Development necessarily assumes a multidimensional or pluridimensional territorial content, in favor of the right to the city, the right to the countryside, and the place of good coexistence, always contrary to the valorization of the capital and the bourgeois state's reproduction.

From this perspective, we believe that stimulating the discussion about the territory can also mean an opportunity to review practices, to analyze the past and the present, and to imagine new possibilities to inhabit future conquered lands, a process that we are calling *territorial engagement*. We understand territorial engagement in the same sense as Saquet (2017, p. 29, our translation) would define *territorial anchorage*, in which "the territory corresponds to an object of value creation by multiple forms of collective

action, geographically anchored". To engage territorially would thus mean to enable the creation and strengthening of bonds with the place, to increase collective organization and political action through a common purpose: the territory.

During one semester, photography, theater, and collective mapping activities were carried out with about 15 young people from the settlement, with whom we formed the Ho Chi Minh Youth Group. In this context, cinema appears as a strategy of mobilization from the inside out: in one of these workshops, the youngsters had the idea of making a documentary about the settlement's stories, as a means to remember past experiences and strengthen the collective memory around the constitution of the territory.

From this idea, we proposed the realization of a film workshop² lasting three days. The objective was to present to youngsters some basic principles and features of filming, to expand their repertoire about the possibilities of cinema as a spatial discussion tool and, finally, to collectively produce the script and the film.

If at first, the idea was to make a documentary about local stories, the used strategies during the workshop created opportunities for this objective to change spontaneously. Following, we present some choices we made, which we believe were relevant for strengthening the autonomy of youngsters during the film's conduction and realization. Subsequently, we reflect on possible ways of seeing and experimenting with cinema as a way of territorial rediscovery and engagement.

3 Presenting places through cinema

Films tell stories about people but also about places. From the famous scenes of Lumière brothers to current films, it is visible the fact that filmmakers from all over the world based their works on the articulation of fragments of spaces within the temporalities constructed by the films, which, by forming the image, stimulate sensations, memories, associations, and affections on the viewer.

The possibility of using different planes, angles, cuts, juxtapositions, framings, and sequences in film editing [...] allowed the represented spaces to move from the simple reference of characters' location to an important way of creating meanings (De Brot, 2019, p. 25, our translation).

Based on these premises and even before we began filming or discussing a possible script, we proposed to the youth of Ho Chi Minh Settlement a fundamental activity to expand their imagination about the expressive possibilities of audiovisual production. Accordingly, we watched together some fragments of previously selected films, in which directors use different visual resources to present to spectators a certain place. We exhibited fragments from four films³, as shown in Figure 1, which could be many more if we did not have a restricted time to hold the workshop.

It seemed important to us, at that moment, to shed light on the fact that "images are surfaces that intend to represent something", and, at the same time, to exercise the imagination, which is precisely "the ability to make and decipher images" (Flusser, 1985, p. 7, our translation):

Images are not sets of symbols with defined meanings, as are the ciphers: they are not "denotative". Images offer its receivers an interpretative space: "connotative" symbols. [...] The meaning of images is the magical context of reversible relationships. The magical nature of images is essential for understanding its messages. Images are codes that translate events into situations, processes in scenes. It is not that images eternalize events; they replace events with scenes (Flusser, 1985, p. 7, our translation).

Therefore, allowing the youth to *wander* through the various surfaces and layers present in the displayed scenes constituted a strategy to expand their imagery repertoire and their imagination about the multitude of meanings embedded in the images, and to make them notice the multiple possibilities of cinema as a way of telling stories about specific places.



Fig. 1: Screening of Rang-e khoda film. Source: Author's collection, 2019.

In our selection of films, we concentrated on fragments that allowed several questions: What did the director want to show in the scenes? What elements let us notice their intentions? How was the scene filmed? Where was the camera placed? What sensations did the shooting choices produce? Such questions, now organized here, came out spontaneously from the conversations catalyzed by the chosen scenes and by the exercise of seeking in the in-between-ness of the image-questions, meanings, and different interpretations. Moreover, the act of provoking youngsters with questions, stimulating their opinion about what they were watching – and not simply presenting ready-made strategies and ideas on how to shoot – illustrated our effort to stimulate the active and critical position of the participants towards the images they were seeing and formulating for themselves. This ended up creating a democratic space, opened to discussions, where everyone should feel comfortable giving opinions, criticizing, and thinking of new ideas for their film.

After this activity, we proposed a question that would guide the construction of the script, and to be answered by the youngsters using the camera: **how to present the Ho Chi Minh Settlement to someone who does not know it?** This question brought the discussion of the previous fragments to a common territory for participants and made room for them to show the place where they live in the way they found more convenient. Hence, through this question, we strived to expand their freedom and inventive ability to talk about themselves. In other words, as Paulo Freire wrote, we tried to enable each youngster not to be "a mere spectator, to whom it was not lawful to interfere with reality to modify it" (Freire, 1967, p. 41, our translation). Given the challenge of answering the question through cinema, we set out for the familiarization with equipment and for the collective creation of the film's script, which began that afternoon and continued for the following days.

4 Building a film collectively

Since the workshop preparation, we refused to give much importance to filming techniques, which were restricted to the basic principles of sound and video equipment: how to turn on and off, zoom, record, and watch the records. If at first sight this refuse gesture could be interpreted as an act of deprivation of technical knowledge for those who had never used a camera, we understood it, on the contrary, and again in line with Paulo Freire, as the assumption that "teaching is not transferring knowledge [from someone to another], but creating possibilities for their own production or construction [of knowledge]" (Freire, 2003, p. 47, our translation). We wanted the youngsters' gaze on their territory to be as genuine as possible. Not the result of a hierarchical relationship – but a risky, we could say – clash of forces where those who were supposed to be taught take over the image, develop ways of looking, and invent new ways of narrating the world around them.

After a brief explanation about the equipment's basic operations, keeping in mind the task of showing their territory to someone who does not know it, we presented the usual roles related to filmmaking to the participants. Correspondingly, each one could choose which role to take according to their interests: actors, directors, cameras, sound crew, and producers. The youngsters could change such roles throughout the shootings through agreements and exchanges amongst themselves. Each participant received an identification badge to register the chosen function – a feature that proved to be very important, as it generated greater commitment to the performance of each role during the recordings of the scenes. With the team's roles defined, we started the shooting, as shown in Figure 2, characterized by an openness to the unexpected. That is the endless possibilities of script creation and change – or, in other words, the collective management of the film.



Fig. 2: Basic directions for the equipment's use. Source: Author's collection, 2019.

Together, the youngsters decided where the first scenes would be shot. Guided by the chosen directors, they improvised dialogues while being filmed. The shooting began in the ruins of a distillery, which had been part of an old farm located where the settlement now situates. The distillery had been deactivated when the farm went bankrupt, long before the arrival of the current residents. In the first scene created by them, some youngsters and children of the Ho Chi Minh Settlement found themselves lost among the ruins, looking for something they still did not know about. As the scenes were being recorded – and approved by the entire team – new places and situations were being suggested to continue the narrative. Additionally, the script was developed gradually in a spontaneous way, following the collective engagement of the team. From each shooting, proposed place, and improvised situation, we acknowledged the potential of cinema in embracing challenges around collective experience. Such an experience was slowly constituted through several discussions and negotiations, acceptance of differences between each participant and careful work of listening and sharing, as shown in Figure 3.



Fig. 3: Negotiations and agreements were part of each scene's execution. Source: Author's collection, 2019.

The workshop concerned not only about giving voice to the youngsters but mainly allowing our destabilization by their reality to deconstruct the relations of power embedded in the filming act, as claimed by the critic Jean-Louis Comolli:

I fear, for example, that filmmakers who say and put themselves in a position of "giving" – and this applies especially to the documentary filmmakers, particularly those who, for charity, propose to "give the word to those who are deprived of it" – do nothing more than taking the master's place again, to reproduce the gesture of power. Because it's not a question of "giving", but of taking and being taken, it is always about violence: not of returning to some dispossessed what I would have and would decide that it is needed, but of creating a relationship of forces in which I risk being as dispossessed as he is (Comolli, 2008, p. 74, our translation).

By acting only as mediators in the scripting, shooting, producing and acting, allowing youngsters themselves to make decisions about the film's course, we sought to articulate not a relationship of control (where we, the supposed experts, could simply film the settlement's reality) but a turbulent relationship of encounter and confrontation conditioned by the uncertainties of reality, where the production of a film "thus becomes a conjugation, a relationship about interlacing with the other – even in the form" (Comolli, 2008, p. 85, our translation).

6 The daily life fabulation and territory rediscovery

In the beginning, we intended to create with the youngsters a documentary about their place. Therefore, our experimental collective procedures and manners for sharing the shooting script created a favorable ground for the participants to represent themselves and their everyday experiences through fiction. Early on, the situations invented and improvised by participants in front of the camera evidenced, as proposed by anthropologist Ilana Feldman (2012), the transition from a representative regime (where those who film maintain a certain control over the filmed situation) to a performative regime (defined by the coexistence of multiple points of view on what is filmed). Sometimes complementary, sometimes divergent, these various points of view that reside in the performative regime trigger the "*story-telling function of the poor*" (Deleuze apud Gonçalves, 2007, p. 137, our translation), which fictionalize to "assert themselves in as much as real" (Gonçalves and Head, 2009, p. 23, our translation). When youngsters create stories and characters very close to who they are, we see the absence of a "clear and distinct division between the representation itself and what it represents" (Gonçalves and Head, 2009, p. 21, our translation). So, we do not know what existed before the film's production and what was created during the process, what is *story-telling* for the camera and what is part of youngster's real-life, who is an invented character and who is a real one.

"Ordinary life *produces fiction* – it produces images – and, in reverse, *it produces* itself in images, it is produced *in and by fiction*", as proposed by the researcher André Brasil (2011, p. 3, our translation). The image becomes the place "where life forms are performed" (Brasil, 2011, p. 5, our translation), simultaneously associated with the real and cinema worlds.

The performance exposes the *continuity* between one domain and another – the lived and the imagined: it is the nature of gesture already artificialized and the artifice of the displaced *mise-en-scène* – "naturalized" – by the gesture's spontaneity and unpredictability. However, it shows us that between the lived and the imagined there is also *discontinuity*: the image's artifice allows the gesture to lag out of itself – to perform, to assemble itself – that is, to be, inside the film, another gesture; and, on the other hand, the gesture's irreducibility persists and resists, it escapes, to some extent, the image's ordering (Brasil, 2011, p. 7, our translation).

In this threshold between everyday life and filmed scene, fiction emerges not as a form of simple staging, but as a process of subjectivation in which one who performs his own life to the camera articulates another image of himself. It is, therefore, a question of producing and reinventing a body (Brasil, 2011, p. 10, our translation) – and, consequently, reinventing the world around it.

This world, materialized in the settlement's territory, also becomes a subject to be rediscovered through fiction. By representing themselves – or characters very close to their everyday life – and developing the film from collectively chosen places, the youth of Ho Chi Minh reveals to us and to one another a multitude of relationships with the place they inhabit. Behind ordinary life, we notice, through the characters-residents performance, spaces of affection filled by shared practices and other ways of dealing with the territory. These are represented by the cultivation in the backyards, the trails in the forests until reaching the waterfalls, the modest neighborhood networks, and the shared lunches in the elders' house.

To the extent that we allowed ourselves, therefore, to be guided through these paths, we built an image of Ho Chi Minh from the life performed by the youngsters in the scenes, as if we were forming a puzzle from the character's eyes themselves, as shown in Figure 4. As French filmmaker Agnès Varda well said, "it is by understanding people that we understand the places best, it is understanding the places that we understand people best" (Varda, 1998, our translation).



Fig. 4: In one of the scenes, the young people present the settlement to each other. Source: Author's collection, 2019.

6 Gathering the neighborhood around the screen

On the last day, after the end of the short film *A Procura* shootings – which at this point already had a very well-defined name and narrative by participants, we held a short meeting where we all decided that the workshop proponents would be responsible for the film editing⁴. Additionally, the youngsters would organize themselves for the premiere session two weeks later, intending to gather their families, friends, and neighbors. Again, we collectively defined who would be responsible for each function: to spread posters and help in the dissemination, to organize the space and a snack for the event. All functions were extremely important for the premiere to take place successfully, so that everyone should feel responsible for it, breaking once again with the one-sided relations usually existent in this kind of workshop.

On the premiere's eve, a group printed and distributed a small poster around the settlement, bus lines, and at the school in the Carmo da União village, where most of Ho Chi Minh Settlement's children study. On the premiere day, residents gathered to prepare popcorn, hot dogs, and soda for the audience, who had assembled in the collective space where the workshop had been held to honor the youth's work. Between smiles and expressions of surprise, a great part of the community saw some of their relatives on the improvised screen, while the youngsters could remember the experience lived from the camera and recognize, in their images, the constitutive bonds of their everyday life.

We moved away here from the traditional dark, silent room, filled with padded chairs that characterize the traditional movie spectator experience, and shifted to another space, witnessing other ways of treating cinema, now opened to the young people's world in the same way that the Ho Chi Minh Settlement once had opened to their eyes. When we presented the result of our workshop to the people who participated in it (directly or indirectly), we perceived the continuation of cinema's power in articulating collective experiences. More than being the conclusion moment of a process, the screening brings the community together around its own representation. "In face of the images, the community assumes a certain distance and, at the same time, is involved with what appears to it on the present of its experience" (Brasil, 2016, p. 80, our translation). Here, the gesture of seeing together⁵ is only the beginning of other shared experiences, particularly powerful for strengthening bonds within the settlement. Seeing yourself and your neighbors on a large screen mean, in addition to the significant value of the involved subjects, the recognition of a community ruled by affection and solidarity networks – a reality that is not always easy to assimilate and that, here, cinema helps to highlight.

Recognizing that the autonomy of settlements can always put at risk the collective sense of these organizations, researcher Joviano Mayer writes about the many challenges in maintaining the common purpose of such diverse and self-sufficient groups. In addition to external forces, such as threats from the police and landowners, the life in settlements is constantly threatened by individualism, competition, and tendency to reproduce social practices linked to private property (Mayer, 2015, p. 227). To maintain a strong collective bond – the key to the survival of these organizations – Mayer points the importance of reinforcing common ties and spaces:

By shedding light on the collective bonds present in the Ho Chi Minh Settlement, the cinema, starred by the youngsters, operates as a way of remembering the solidarity bonds and political struggles weakened by the

The occupation is stronger (in the sense of brokering support and creating a solidary network capable of countering the Capital-State's action in face of the political onus that displacing entails) the greater its capacity to constitute common spaces (collective infrastructure, meetings, productive and cultural activities, political formation, struggles, direct actions, etc.) and to involve people in attempting this goal, residents or not (Mayer, 2015, p. 225, our translation).

challenges of the elder's daily routine but operated and reinvented constantly by the younger ones. More than a mere register, cinema gains here a dimension of a producer of *meaning*, a way of "enhancing relations, collaborating for common meaning maintenance among a territory's cohabitants, whose unity remains at great cost amid the challenges of an autonomous formation" (Resende, 2016, p. 115, our translation). The public screening and the act of bringing the community together to see itself on the screen reaffirm, finally, the possibility of thinking about cinema as a process, in which the strengthening of collectivity and territorial bounds supports the filmmaking process, from production until its premiere.

7 Final considerations

Cinema has increasingly become an important tool to give voice to groups historically excluded from official narratives. Through the creation of images, these people, whose visibility and existence need to be constantly reaffirmed, clarify ways of living and seeing the world that persist despite power disputes on multiple scales. They also question inequalities, conflicts, and processes of segregation and erasure of their memory.

Thinking about the unstable context denounced by this emerging cinematographic production, geographer Marcelo Lopes de Souza (2009) points out the importance for them to develop an awareness of their rights and to participate in the decision-making process about their territories, through an idea of autonomy based on self-management and self-instruction. If the logic of the forces that act in space often is in the hands of specialists and gets separated from the daily life sphere, Souza affirms that a political practice can only be successful if one gives proper possibilities for people to instruct themselves: "a political and strategic action that results in truly democratic and inclusive participatory practices" (De Brot, 2019, p. 18, our translation).

Many architects nowadays seek to develop tools and practices that provide individuals a critical perspective towards how processes that are reproduced both in the city and in the countryside interfere in the daily life sphere. Accordingly, would not the filming practice be a possibility of engagement and mutual learning about such processes? Wouldn't cinema be a welcoming place for different kinds of knowledge about space and truly inclusive participatory practices?

In the context of the Ho Chi Minh Settlement, we sought to expand the canonical practice of architects and urban planners towards a collective experiment of "cinema as praxis" (Comolli, 2008, p. 175, our translation), i.e. a laboratory of knowledge about the world made from images, which have "the chance to deal only with the fissures of the real, of what resists, of what remains, the slag, the residual, the excluded" (Comolli, 2008, p. 172, our translation). And this intention could only be achieved by relying on a tactical attitude as a procedure, a method that is open to the unexpected, constantly adapted to limits of time, space, techniques, and participants' interest. In this article, we tried to highlight the limits and potentialities of such methodological openness, towards contributing to a review of methods that use cinema as a tool of spatial reading and social expression, and which addresses both urban and rural dynamics.

On the one hand, this methodological gesture of almost a refusal (in terms of a fixed method), based mainly on adaptability, resulted in greater discomfort from our part, as we are used to working with rules and norms that create a much more predictable ground. On the other hand, it fostered higher levels of autonomy and engagement between youngsters. By building their narratives about the world, without external definitions of what is supposedly legitimate or not, participants collectively produced their knowledge about the space where they live. They also weaved and strengthened bonds of affection, and articulated an important engagement with their territory from the filmmaking process.

If cinema has important lessons to teach architects and urban planners, to accept unpredictable conditions is certainly one of them. Overlapped by the uncertainties of reality that, even fictionalized, penetrates the image, a cinema made directly in the field – a result of encounters, exchanges, and conflicts – depends on the relations it establishes with what is around the camera. Hence, such cinema cannot be performed from a position outside the world (the favorite framing of planners when they design from a supposedly privileged external view). Far from representing a weakness, recognizing the impossibility of domesticating the complexity of the world is the basic invention premise: an invention not only of filming processes but also of new ways of doing together.

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1 The ideas included in this article have influences of other works such as *The worlds among us: politics of space in documentary cinema* (De Brot, 2019) and *Beyond the city* (Santos, 2019). We are extremely thankful to Raul Lemos for his advice and interventions.

2 The workshop was held by Aline Franceschini, Felipe De Brot, Iara Pezzuti, and Raul Lemos, with resources from the Association Architects Without Borders (ASF-Brasil). Approximately 15 young people and children participated, with three semi-professional cameras, two sound recorders, and a clapperboard.

3 Fragments from the following films were shown: *El Vuelco del Cangrejo* (Oscar Ruíz Navia, 2010); *Rang-e khoda* (Majid Majidi, 2017); *Felicidade* (Isabela Izidoro, 2017); and *La Tierra y la Sombra* (César Acevedo, 2015).

4 Due to the limited time we had, we took the front of the film's editing, always taking into account the young people's desires concerning the narrative elements, continuously discussed during the shootings.

5 In recent texts, André Brasil points the "seeing together" as an important meeting moment of a given community that, seeing itself on the screen, takes a certain critical distance about itself. (BRASIL, 2016, p. 79, our translation).