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REVISTA V!RUS
V!RUS JOURNAL

issn 2175-974x

dezembro . december 2020



ÁGORA
AGORA

NARRATIVA EM TECNOLOGIAS MÓVEIS: “NUNCA É NOITE NO MAPA”

THE NARRATIVE IN MOBILE TECHNOLOGIES: “IT’S NEVER NIGHTTIME IN THE MAP”

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PT | EN

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How to quote this text: Favretto, A.; Vassali, M., 2020. The narrative in mobile technologies: reflections on the short film “It’s never nighttime in the map”. *V!RUS*, 21, December. [online] Available at: <http://www.nomads.usp.br/virus/_virus21/?sec=4&item=16&lang=en>. [Accessed: dd Month yyyy].

ARTICLE SUBMITTED ON AUGUST 23, 2020

Abstract

The text seeks to reflect on the appropriation cinema makes of technical instruments in its narratives, especially the technologies that make mobile services available. In a moment of tension between individual and space, such as the one we live in 2020 due to the pandemic of covid-19, the web and the digital end up becoming territories of atypical experiences of insertion and reflection on the body and the city. We chose Ernesto de Carvalho’s short film *It’s never nighttime in the map (sic)* (*Nunca é noite no mapa*, 2016) and its narrative, which incorporates Google Street View as the primary source of its images, as our object of study. To better understand it, the text analyses the film from the perspective of a database narrative, according to Lev Manovich, and of the map as a simulacra as in Jean Baudrillard. The insertion of the filmmaker (who is both a narrator and a character) is perceived from the idea of the body as a central image in Henri Bergson’s perspective and from the flâneur for Walter Benjamin. Finally, the essay-like construction of the short film finds its reflections on Alexandre Astruc.

Keywords: Mobility technologies, Brazilian cinema, Google Street View, City

1 Introduction

If, previously, we used to live the era of reproducibility of images, today we are experiencing its crisis. If everyone has tools and devices that enable audiovisual recordings and manipulation, thinking about them from the point of trivialization is a plausible perspective. In times of pandemic, the image crisis seems to be intensified: among live streams, video-meetings, and journalistic material, evidential records, their framing, and image noises are repeated. Excess, speed, and breadth of information thus have a direct effect on contemporary cinema, which takes two main paths when relating to this phenomenon. One of them is answering by opposition: considering that this is a moment of ephemerality and non-stop consumption of information, the narratives make use of extended temporalities, long takes, and inaction. These are films guided by suspensions and repetitions, aiming at a relationship with the viewer based on the experience of a "real" temporality. The other way is to incorporate an aesthetic made available by new technologies. Today, the idea of technology refers us "to technical instruments that come from informatics and allow the manufacture of visual objects" (Dubois, 2004, p. 31, our translation). Thus, notions of convergence and ubiquity operate in films of different themes and have a decisive role in the conduction of their narratives.

Along with the expansion of mobile technologies such as laptops, smartphones, and tablets, as well as the multiple services offered by mobile applications, the consumption and aesthetics of audiovisual also change. The contemporary phenomenon of an accelerated expansion of technologies based on mobility services is noticeable (Lopes, 2012). For this author, the technical images that appear on different devices such as cell phones, portable videogames, GPS navigators, among other devices, "arise as contemporary phenomena that respond to certain social anxieties, among which the desires for traffic and mobility stand out" (Lopes, 2012, p. 2, our translation). Lopes also draws attention to the appropriation of such technologies for purposes and motivations other than those for which they were originally programmed as far as these technologies become increasingly accessible.

The short film *It's never nighttime in the map (sic)* (*Nunca é noite no mapa*, Ernesto de Carvalho, 2016) appropriates the records made by Google Street View to expose relations between the city and the digital images produced by Google resources. The director, whose image, in the opening seconds of the film, is captured through the lens of Google's vehicle, builds from his voice off a bridge between the viewer and the images. While perceiving and selecting, Ernesto lends his body to give meaning to those images. In addition, the film raises contemporary issues about the use of database images and hybrid narratives. Both discussions are crossed by the use of digital technologies and mobile devices as a way to capture and consume audiovisual products. In its six minutes, the short film is about the mapping that capitalism makes of urban spaces and the transformation of these spaces.

The product is also perceived as a symptom of the relationship between virtual spaces and everyday experiences: there is a contamination of political and social crisis in the images and the way they are constructed. Narratives are forged and the truth does not lie in the record, but in how it is narrated. The pandemic moment makes us wander in the pixelated territory, the experiences are simultaneous and the notion of time expands: we have never been so digital.

To articulate the discussion about the film – our object of study –, we start from the following axes: the notion of narrativity in a database (Manovich, 2001), the simulacra (Baudrillard, 1994), the presence of the body (Bergson, 1991) and the *flânerie* (Benjamin, 2009) and, finally, the essay construction in Astruc (2012).

2 The click as a movement during the pandemic

Walter Benjamin brings, in his work *Passages*, the figure of the *flâneur*. For him, this being wanders along the old and the new of a Paris that begins to modernize, in the 19th century, perceiving the city as a reflection of his body inserted in a historical process. He lets himself get lost, between one street and another, in a familiar city that loses its architectural features, resignifies places and updates the very idea of space. In this sense, "Benjamin presents the *flâneur* as the one who still has fragments of the true historical experience and, recognizing the distance that separates him from that experience, he represents the search for a current historical awareness" (Biondillo, 2014, p. 9, our translation).

By evoking this figure, in parallel with the current moment, we suggest an approximation between the Parisian *flâneur* and the pandemic *flâneur*. Inserted in a time that is done in a claustrophobic and isolated way, we perceive the transformation of the city in a different logic: we watch the streets through frames, whether they are private windows or technical devices, such as smartphones (via social networks) and television (TV news). The city resignifies itself, as does our view of it. We access, between pixels and clicks, a city that, inevitably,

will not be the same after this atypical period. The pandemic flâneur also participates in a conscious historical process.

We think about updating the Benjamin flâneur as a body-click that wanders across web territories. Experiencing an anachronism, a break with everyday life and linear time. The days and hours are experienced in peculiar ways: the work – carried out through meetings via video platforms – is from one tab to the other. Movement-click-work. Movement-click-classroom. Movement-click-concert of the favorite singer. Sometimes, all at the same time, if you can call 'time' the actions between one movement and another.

From these first reflections we start discussing our empirical object as a tension between the body, the click, the city, and the map. How does the city move? How do we move? The short film *It's never nighttime in the map* was produced before the pandemic. However, it illustrates how our movements over spaces have been constructed. In refusing the traditional approach to time, we see no linearity or separation between one action and another. As previously said, the click and the pixel do not know the concepts of day and night, of early or late, of fun or work, of lived and recorded: moving between tabs is the only logic of the flâneur on the web.

Therefore, we feel tensioned to build a contemporary reading, from the perspective of the philosopher Giorgio Agamben, between the flâneur of the 19th century and the digital flâneur of the 21st century. In shedding the light of the past on the present, we believe that the parallel between these two figures becomes powerful, since

(...) The appointment that is in question in contemporariness does not simply take place in chronological time: it is something that, working within chronological time, urges, presses, and transforms it. And this urgency is the untimeliness, the anachronism that permits us to grasp our time in the form of a "too soon" that is also a "too late"; of an "already" that is also a "not yet." Moreover, it allows us to recognize in the obscurity of the present the light that, without ever being able to reach us, is perpetually voyaging toward us. (Agamben, 2009, p. 47)

Inserted in this digital reality, we are led to create routes in the virtual space. The movement operated by the clicks between texts, images, and data traces a particular path, inventing its own narrative based on what is available on the web. Therefore, in the next pages, we outline some attempts to map the movements of the digital flâneur from the database narratives, the body-click, and the images presented in Ernesto de Carvalho's short film.

3 Database and narrative

In the book *The language of New Media*, Lev Manovich (2001) questions and develops a thought that starts from the relationship between the database and the narrative. According to the author, both compete for the same space in human culture. The first is defined as a list of disordered items (that resists being organized), and the second creates a path of events, disordered at first, but that gain meaning when related to each other. That is why Manovich says that the narrative and the database are "natural enemies" (Manovich, 2001, p. 225). However, in the computer age, databases gain full attention in creative processes. Thus, it makes sense to reflect on a narrative possibility when navigating a database interface, since there are countless possibilities of trajectory.

It is worthy to think about Ernesto de Carvalho's short film from this perspective. There is a narrative created in the Street View interface, which accounts for an endless amount of visual mapping information. Without a narrated logic, of cause and consequence, navigating through these images can be a completely random process of presenting mapped images. The process of exchanging one street for another, taking the cursor in a certain direction, holding time and attention in one image and not in another, is part of the logic of using the interface, which the film assumes as the north of montage in favor of a narration that moves a certain trajectory. However, alone, the database does not have such capacity.

In new media, the database supports a variety of cultural forms that range from direct translation (i.e., a database stays a database) to a form whose logic is the opposite of the logic of the material from itself – narrative. More precisely, a database can support narrative, but there is nothing in the logic of the medium itself that would foster its generation. (Manovich, 2001, p. 228)

Still opposing the narrative to the databases, Manovich resorts to Saussure and Barthes when proposing a semiological analysis based on the concepts of syntagm and paradigm. In languages, the syntagmatic dimension encompasses the combination of signs, and in the organization of elements in sequence it is possible to create a discourse. But each of these elements belongs to a certain set of similar ones to itself.

This is where the paradigmatic dimension occurs, in these groups of similars from which different possible relationships can start. Therefore, Manovich explains that the syntagmatic dimension creates correlations of present elements, while the paradigmatic dimension deals with missing elements. The first, by relating specific words and images, creates a material narrative. The second, by bringing together elements of the imaginary and style, exists virtually. From another perspective, Manovich puts it that "the database of choices from which narrative is constructed (the paradigm) is implicit; while the actual narrative (the syntagm) is explicit" (Manovich, 2001, p. 231)

However, for the author, this logic is reversed in the case of new media, since the database is given a material existence, and the narrative is dematerialized. Through the connection of elements of the database it is built into interactive interfaces. The narrative, along these lines, consists of a sequence of links; the database is responsible for the elements themselves. It is interesting, even so, to see that in such media there is still a logic of sequential language along with a spatial narrative, where elements are presented simultaneously. Manovich (2001, p. 232) points to cinema as a dominant semiological order, where the "real" operates in a linear chain. The new media follow this format, presenting information to its user, screen after screen.

There are several sequences in *It's never nighttime in the map* that illustrate Manovich's reflections on the narrative and databases in the new media. The images chosen by Carvalho support his narration because they are grouped in similarity within a certain linearity. At a given moment, in a provocation by the director about the transformation of spaces, the film presents records of the same geolocation, as shown in Figure 1. In chronological order, the images show a set of dwellings that, over time, disappear, giving way to a construction site.

Such images are not registered by the director, but selected by him within Google Street View database. His narration confirms and provokes reflections based on what the images show, which in the film operate as what can be defined as material. It is the database's own set of records that takes shape. The paradigm is made explicit. The narration, on the other hand, provokes, but it is not concrete. The linearized assembly also hides in favor of Google's supporting data. The syntagm is implied.



Fig. 1: Images from the same geolocation at different times, registered in Street View. In *It's never nighttime in the map*, they are presented in sequence. Source: Ernesto de Carvalho, 2016. Available at <https://vimeo.com/175423925>. Accessed: 06/15/2020.

4 Simulacra and Street View

When developing a reflection on the contemporary, Baudrillard (1994), in his famous *Simulacra and Simulation*, points out that society operates through symbols and not necessarily from reality, as if it had ceased to exist. In this way, we live guided by representations of the real. Such representations often depart from reality and tend to be more attractive to the human eye. In today's society, the phenomenon of simulacra is the result of media representations definitely linked to the capitalist process. They hold the viewer's or user's attention much more than the reality they represent. This distortion of the world is enhanced by consumerist behavior, which includes the crisis of images and the phenomena of mobility.

When introducing his thoughts about the simulacra, Baudrillard mentions a short story by Jorge Luis Borges on a map that would cover exactly the territory of an empire, such were the wealth of details. Based on this allegory, he sees in cartographic art a kind of an embryo of the simulacra, its origin. However, if formerly abstraction occurred on the map itself, due to its double or mirror effect, the simulation occurs today from a Real with no origin and still less reality. Baudrillard speaks of a hyper-real, which in its operability no longer accounts for reality, since it does not carry any imagery itself.

Territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory – precession of simulacra – that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. The desert of the real itself. (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 1, our translation)

Today, one of the most used mappings on the web belongs to Google: Maps is one of the company's applications that allows user interaction. From this context, Street View emerges in 2017, presenting to the user sequential photographs in 360° and high resolution, of different locations in the world. When navigating the application, it is as if we entered the spaces presented by it, sometimes thousands of kilometres away. It is, therefore, a virtual representation of the spaces that surround us in millions of images registered by *Google* itself, from its mapping vehicles, and also by the users themselves, who can collaborate with particular images.

In the case of the photographs taken by the automobiles hired by the company, the subjectivity of the photographer does not exist, given that the human element only drives the vehicle while the camera attached to it makes the panoramic records. Therefore, such images do not only show places, but they catch facts, such as accidents, intimacies and even the ordinary circulation of people on streets. To avoid controversies related to privacy, the application started to blur people's faces and license plates on purpose. Even so, some situations escape the activity of the algorithm (Pedrosa, 2018). This author states that, in its records, *Street View* acts in a way to "eliminate the consciousness-existence of the traditional photographer in the process of image production" (Pedrosa, p. 19, our translation), and goes further by noting that even if the driver of the vehicle understands the equipment, he never touches the camera trigger, let alone frames and directs it.

It is inevitable that, in this registration model, a certain hyper-reality coined by Baudrillard can be perceived, especially if the absence of an imagery in its operability is taken into account. In *It's never nighttime in the map*, Carvalho searches different unexpected facts through the app and presents them in sequence, such as the police patdowns on young men from outlying ghettos, and the presence of two unconscious men lying on the street, as shown in figure 2. When he does it, the director opens up the imagery crisis inherent in the simulacra, which in its massified and mechanized process of recording everything, is unable to apply any kind of choice in its photographs, naturalizing facts that have nothing to do with its supposed application.



Fig. 2: The map feels no discomfort: records of men in a state of unconsciousness lying on a public street in Street View. Source: Ernesto de Carvalho, 2016. Available at <https://vimeo.com/175423925>. Accessed: 06/15/2020.

As the narrator and editor of the short film, the filmmaker creates a deterritorialization of images, as he creates his own territory. By appropriating images made by Google Street View, he starts from the simple record to understand them from a social and political perspective. In the same way, Ernesto ends up creating his own territory through the desire to denounce, show, move the map around with his voice and his body. The power of the audiovisual work lies in this specific point: how, why, and by whom is this map drawn?

5 The body roams the city

In a Bergsonian perspective, the body is a central image that perceives all other images in the universe. This central image uses perception and selects images based on their usefulness among an infinite number of images, only those it deems useful for action in the present. In *Memory and Matter*, Bergson (1991) talks about this utility and states that "the images which surround us will turn toward our body the side, emphasized by the light upon it, which interests our body. They will detach from themselves that which we have arrested on its way, that which we are capable of influencing." (Bergson, 1991, p. 34, our translation).

Here we bring an approximation between the flâneur's wandering body through the city and the meanings attributed to Google's images. One of the most relevant aspects for Benjamin and his flâneur is that he looks for experiences without any commitment to apprehending reality or knowledge. In his short film, Ernesto de Carvalho begins the narration by presenting the space where he lives: "The city where I live, seen from above, in this interpolated, helpful aerial map". As he continues, the director reiterates the immovable nature

of the map when he states that “the map does not need legs, nor wings, the map does not walk, fly or run, does not feel discomfort and has no opinion”. During the narration, the viewer sees the map moving, entering the streets and alleys of the city where the author lives. From the montage between voice and image, it is clear that the person who lends the body, opinion and legs to the map is Ernesto, whose function is to provide mobility and make the map move from his clicks. Thus, tools such as zooming, the targeting and approaching of the houses are derived from Ernesto’s movements, as shown in Figure 3.



Fig. 3: Ernesto directs the body-map through his clicks. Source: Ernesto de Carvalho, 2016. Available at <https://vimeo.com/175423925>. Accessed: 06/15/2020.

There is a tension between body and city from the flâneur’s movement: a person who roams the streets, giving movement to the desires to experience it. For Bergson, the body perceives the images around it acting in the present. At a certain point, Ernesto finds himself in the film, as shown in figure 4. His body is captured and perceived by Google Street View while using a camera to photograph the map: he observes while he is observed. Then, the film ends with the image that starts its trajectory: an aerial record that frames the entire city. Ernesto returns the map to ground zero, motionless, and removes his body in one last click. The map exists only through the body that perceives it.



Fig. 4: Ernesto registers the map. The map registers Ernesto. Source: Ernesto de Carvalho, 2016. Available at <https://vimeo.com/175423925>. Accessed: 06/15/2020.

6 An essay

If the images reveal some of the problems already mentioned in Google mapping system, Carvalho’s narration also triggers, in a critical tone, certain findings. Avoiding the merely expository or didactic text, the director sets the tone by (re)affirming that he is on the map, stuck in it, captured forever. There, inserted as a perceiving body, he notices how the map doesn’t care about that, it is indifferent to his presence, even though he is, in fact, in the register. From this point on, several of the images the film presents seem to prove its initial prerogative, that the map does not feel discomfort and has no opinion on what it registers. It just does it automatically, obeying the contract it has with Google itself. The film compares it to a private security agent, who, when guarding, establishes an agreement that is neither with the community, nor with the State, but with property.

Both the text and selected images comprise different reflections by the author on his object of interest. Astruc (2012), in his writings on the “camera-pen”, refers to the essay as a way to express a certain obsession of its author. The narrative construction of *It’s never nighttime in the map* mixes judgments and questions, in a cinematographic conduction that makes use of the creative process appropriation. The essay as a literary format (but which extends to the arts, like cinema itself) occurs at an intermediate point between prose and poetry, between extremes that are the aesthetic state of creation and the ethical state of conviction, where it oscillates in ambivalence (Bense, 2014).

If editing has the power to give movement to two static images, and, in this path, to demarcate an idea, this is particularly noticeable in Carvalho's short film. In the fluidity of this construction in continuity, there are the intermittences inherent to the essay process, which brings together distinct fragments in favor of a basic idea of the film. Thus, the images of a construction site, a barefoot filmmaker, and police patdowns, assembled, operate according to a directed reasoning. By exploring such narrative possibilities the filmmaker establishes a reflection on the object by which he reveals his obsession. In his choice of words and images, the filmmaker writes his thoughts on screen, the explanation of the relationship between "a human being and another human being or certain objects that are part of his universe" (Astruc, 2012, p. 8, our translation).

Therefore, it is from the junction of the materiality of seemingly disconnected facts found in the *Street View* database and from the provocations of a critical narration that, in narrative terms, the short *It's never nighttime in the map* is constructed. The appropriation that makes a mobile technology when conceiving a work of cinema is a tendency of easy location in contemporary practices. By allowing the creation of a narrative in the database space, the film makes an effort to give meaning to the communication practices that are already so interwoven in daily life, assuming a critical stance towards the notions of what is "real" in these virtual spaces. When inserting himself on the map, Ernesto creates his own route and narrative. In evoking Suely Rolnik's *vibrating body* and the cartographer as a builder of passages, the director "lets his body vibrate at all possible frequencies and is inventing positions from which vibrations find sounds, passages, a ride to *existentialization*. He accepts life and surrenders. Body and tongue." (Rolnik, 1989, p. 32, our translation)

Finally, in the observation of the indifference in which Street View operates, the short film provokes by suggesting an absence of abstraction and, therefore, of the imagery in these mapping devices, linking them purely to the interest of capitalism. And from this provocation comes his artistic and political effort, whose essay format is greatly appreciated by cinema. The film, in addition, operates as an object that comprises the experiments of space from images already produced. These experiments, during the writing of the text, present themselves as the only possibilities for walking around the city.

7 Conclusions

An essay that is built on an imagetic object, such as in the case of this text, tends to become branched and difficult to control. From each image that emerges from the film, countless audiovisual processes build new meanings. With *It's never nighttime in the map*, we chose an approach through the pandemic process of perceiving the city with the body and the technical devices.

The power of the construction of meaning is carried out from images available on Google Street View and the voice off of the director, while simulating a walk through the city. We appropriated the figure of the flâneur, described in the work of Walter Benjamin, to bring contemporary relations closer to those of the early 19th century. The update of the flâneur in web territories clashes with the perception of the city through unconventional windows: if, until then, the body has lived in places with notions of time and space, now, device windows lead us to simultaneous experiences between body and space, with no sense of chronological time. It's never nighttime (or daytime) on the web.

Based on the constructs that the production itself makes emerge from the images, Ernesto de Carvalho's short film deals with the feeling of territory loss, the distance between body and city, and the reframed and updated use of technologies. The use of contemporaneity and concepts such as duration and database support the reading perspective that we attribute to Carvalho's work, from which notice relationships between the body, the click, the space and the pandemic itself.

Finally, it is worth noticing the recurrence in the use of archival images, such as those from Google Street View, for narrative constructions in contemporary cinema, as well as the filmmaker's need for a more direct insertion in the work. It is a latent process of putting an intimate and close approach to public images. Director Ernesto de Carvalho has his voice and, at a certain point, images of his own body to criticize the appropriations of the city and the perceptions about it. Ultimately, he creates his own map but, differently from the mapping system he uses to do it, one that recognizes social and historical gaps in the space it represents.

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