

URBAN NARRATIVES: A VIDEO-LETTER PROCESS WITH THE NEWSPAPER BOCA DE RUA

NARRATIVAS URBANAS: UM PROCESSO DE
VIDEO-CARTA COM O JORNAL BOCA DE RUA

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ABSTRACT

The present study shares the process of the collective achievement of a video-letter regarding the city of Porto Alegre, made with a group of directors of the *Boca de Rua* (Street Mouthpiece) newspaper, which is made by the homeless people of Porto Alegre. It highlights a perspective that sees in the narrator of the city its expression, and bets that there is sharing and sociability stemming from the fragments of narratives produced by the multiplicities that compose it. As a basis, it introduces some concepts of narrative and self-narrative, assuming, based on psychoanalytic theory, that the "I" is eccentric to the subject, and that the self exists as a partial construction. Through the authors W. Benjamin, P. Ricoeur, J-M. Gagnebin, J. Butler e J. Lacan, it points out the importance of composing narratives in the assembly of oneself and the city, creating connections when appropriate, or even legitimizing the fragmentary character of the narrative. The article ends by presenting some narratives composed after the recordings made with the group in the locations chosen by them.

Keywords: *Boca de Rua* newspaper. Video-letter. Porto Alegre. Self-narrative.

RESUMO

O presente estudo compartilha o processo de conquista coletiva de uma vídeo-carta sobre a cidade de Porto Alegre, realizada com um grupo de diretores do jornal *Boca de Rua*, feito pelos moradores de rua de Porto Alegre. Destaca uma perspectiva que vê no narrador da cidade sua expressão e aposta que há compartilhamento e sociabilidade decorrentes dos fragmentos de narrativas produzidas pelas multiplicidades que a compõem. Como base, introduz alguns conceitos de narrativa e autonarrativa, assumindo, com base na teoria psicanalítica, que o "Eu" é excêntrico ao sujeito e que o "Eu" existe como uma construção parcial. Através dos autores W. Benjamin, P. Ricoeur, J-M. Gagnebin, J. Butler e J. Lacan, ressalta a importância de compor narrativas na assembleia de si e da cidade, criando conexões quando apropriado ou até legitimando o caráter fragmentário da narrativa. O artigo termina apresentando algumas narrativas compostas após as gravações feitas com o grupo nos locais escolhidos por eles.

Palavras-chave: Jornal *Boca de Rua*. Vídeo-carta. Porto Alegre. Autonarrativa.

INTRODUCTORY COURSE

This article tells the story of a meeting with a working group, a research field, some cities, paths chosen and others taken in error. It is doubled and redoubled memory of the composition of an experience, an archive and the production of narratives stemming from it. This meeting took place in mid-2000 and the temporal distance made this process a piece of different and many files from that time, including a master's dissertation, a video letter, memories shared in several conversation circles, but that had not been brought together as an article. Why tell this story again? Does this file still make sense (almost) 20 years later?

Regarding the concept of narrative¹, we experience, in Brazil, a particularly critical moment. The appropriation of this concept to legitimize false news, "reinterpretations" of historical facts, disregarding the mediums/archives/experiences from which the narratives originate from, has become a great asset of fascism, whose strong growth in Brazil since the year of 2016 we have closely monitored. Imposing a unique way of seeing events under the relativistic argument that all facts are what they are based on forms of interpretation and ways of narrating, has been the commonplace on social networks and in communication in general, on the city streets. Is everything a matter of point of view? Could it be? We need to understand what's it all about nowadays when we talk about the production of narratives, and this author believes that sharing this work, precisely at this historic moment, can contribute to this reflection.

In the early 2000s, it seemed urgent to produce and circulate narratives that would minimally account for the multiple city experiences that existed in Porto Alegre. In spite of the spectacularization of urban life, visible in the increasingly ostentatious advertisements within the city streets, and in the subjectivity model pursued at cost by the more affluent social classes, with a correlating growing alliance between public power and large companies, other cities would be produced every day on the same grounds. It was a political gesture to make these other cities visible, which took place under the billboards, of the

¹ The book *Guerra de Narrativas (War of Narratives): The political crisis and the struggle for control of the imaginary* (2018), by journalist Luciano Trigo, is a document that evidences the radical thinking of the right-wing politics that elected the current president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro. Since the time before the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, which took place in August 2016, this concept of "war of narratives" is commonly linked, in the social networks supporting the president, with that of "political-party education" and "ideological content", which, according to the author of the book "The left-wing associated with PT (the Brazilian political party named Workers' Party) adopted the strategy of trying to win, through the narrative, the dispute that was lost in the legislature, in the judiciary and in the streets". The word Narrative was associated, in the common sense, with a deceptive discourse, with stories crafted in order to produce a false reality, which, according to the journalist, has been practiced by the left-wing, linked to the PT, in schools, universities, and that which, once unveiled by the right-wing, had made PT lose popularity.

speeches propagated in the disputes over territories between practitioners/residents of the cities and the more or less apparent objectives of capitalizing urban spaces and experiences.

In addition, helping to make legitimate, through the transmission and circulation of narratives, these other forms of life, would also legitimize, at least a little, the experience of those who imagined themselves outside the city, outside the postcard, the billboard, or of any representation of the city. And they were indeed out, as we all were, as everything alive was out of that project, but certainly the circulation through the spectacular planned spaces would not be the same for those who have money and those who do not.

The meeting with a group and with a project that was also starting at that time, the newspaper *Boca de Rua* (Street Mouthpiece)², belonging to the homeless, was a stumbling block in the known city of Porto Alegre, and with them it was possible to travel through so many different cities that, with all this time separating the present from that period, still remains producing senses and deranging spectacular cities wherever one goes.

It also affirms a paradigm that sees in the narrator of the city its expression, and bets that there is sharing and sociability stemming from the fragments of the different voices, which do not make a unison, and that, when clustered together, do not assemble a single city figure. It perceives in the turbulence and catastrophe ways of understanding human societies, which implies a perspective of the city as a temporal object, whose landscape is the impression of the various temporalities present in the movements of its inhabitants (ECKERT e ROCHA, 2005, 86-87).

In addition, this way of interpreting turns the itineraries of the inhabitants into protagonists, establishing them as the shapers of the inhabited spaces in the city, and not simply the effects of public and private policies.

The city reappears as expressive manifestations of human gestures that make it rise to the legitimate status of "inhabited space", thanks to its absolute autonomy as a poetic space, full of the images and stories attributed to them. As a result, urban spaces built and lived, as an ethnographic object, are revealed not as mere reflections of urban policies, but as hosts for the traditions and biographies of their inhabitants whose

² The *Boca de Rua* newspaper is a publication made and sold by homeless people in the city of Porto Alegre, since August 2000. It is a project of the NGO ALICE - Free Agency for Children, Citizenship and Education. Texts, photos and illustrations are elaborated by the homeless during weekly workshops. The money collected in the commercialization of the newspaper fully reverts to the group's participants, constituting an alternative source of income. More information about the group's history, as well as access to the newspaper's contents can be found here: <https://jornalbocaderua.wordpress.com> (accessed in January 2020).

narratives express a collective language that communicates a plurality of identities and memories, remitting their territories to pretexts and human manipulations." (ECKERT e ROCHA, 2005, 87)

This article begins by presenting some concepts of narratives and their fundamental role in the constitution of the subject-inhabitants of the city, as well as the narrated spaces. Soon after, it presents the work process with members of the *Boca de Rua* newspaper, how this meeting took place and what methodological choices shaped this intense work, where affections were mobilized to produce a video letter about the city of Porto Alegre, and ends with some narratives of scenes from the recording of this video, chosen by necessity to make the text fit to this format.

1 ABOUT THE WORK WITH NARRATIVES

The act of narrating, in Walter Benjamin's work, is linked to the ancient concept of *històriē*, linked to travelers' arts of recounting and crafting practices. The narrative is the place for the transmission of a "treasure", a teaching, that the end of a journey confers. The dying man, being a threshold between *two worlds*, is a privileged narrator, can speak of the journey of life with the wisdom of the end and announce the secret of death. Benjamin associates the crises of the narratives with the denial and the removal of death from everyday life that marks modernity.

It also draws attention to the relationship between death and the narrative by emphasizing forgetfulness as a necessary production, realizing that the narrative, when formalizing a memory, produces forgetfulness. The dialectic between remembering and forgetting is the movement of memory and the stories told. Remembering, forgetting, remembering, this forgetfulness produces "fringes", ornaments in time.

In Benjamin's work, the narrative is linked to the concept of aura, which will work both on the considerations about the technical reproducibility of works of art and on issues related to the crisis of traditional narratives. The Narrator imprints their own life on the event, which passes on to the listener as a trail, which allows them to both look and be looked at, at the same time, by the narrative. The other modern forms of communication, brought together mainly by the advent of the press, intend to report the event by clearing precisely this trace of origin, in the Benjaminian sense, which would convey the auratic familiar strangeness, the trait of the singularity of those who tell a story. The singular has nothing to do with manipulation, lying, or truth, but concerns a trait of style, normally thoughtless, unconscious, which passes on to the listener and which, a posteriori, is seen as a style.

In "The book to come", Blanchot proposes that the narrative holds in itself the event, the encounter of chance, which it transmits with its own language, as the usual language cannot handle this transmission. It makes the inevitable bridge to fiction as a support for the shadow, the night, the passion, that which is transmitted without intention: *It narrates what cannot be reported. We narrate what is too real not to ruin the conditions of the measured reality that is ours* (BLANCHOT, 2005, 272). Movement of the establishment of temporalities and metamorphoses, the narrative is the event itself, not its report, in the words of the author, it is a "siren song", something further ahead, already past, but that will soon prove not to be a decoy, it is, in itself, a passage from the real and imaginary registers.

With the weaving of time and narrative Paul Ricoeur produces a beautiful work that articulates itself around the question: what is time? For him, narrating is always doing a temporal reconstruction and without the narrative, we could not speak and divide time, there would be no duration of/in time.

Tying together memory, time and narrative, is the motto for his thinking about identity, which aims to overcome the harshness which make up this concept. Narrative identity would be the way of giving character to temporalization, restoring the necessary movement from intrigues-events, which metamorphose and allow characteristics to last, but differ. This author proposes that the narrative identity occurs in the interval of the sameness, self-identity, and ipseity, of the maintenance of the self. It would be a way of producing the variation contingent to what is in time, *"making the character narrable, the narrative restores the movement, abolished in the acquired dispositions, in the sedimented identifications"* (RICOEUR, 1990, 171) (BECHLER, 2011)

The question of identity arises through the work of time. How to say that it is the same, how to say that it is another, in the passage of time? The entire work of the narrative is to produce this variation, supported by the character that will move itself, move the narrative and give consistency to time. Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative* proposes the self as another: *"the narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her identity, in constructing the story told. It is the identity of the story which makes the identity of the character"* (RICOEUR, 1990, 176).

Ricoeur (1990) points out that the narrative identity occurs in the very movement of assembling the self, an activity that lasts a lifetime and that makes the intersection between history and narrative:

I then elaborated the hypothesis according to which the narrative identity, be that of a person or of a community, would be the sought place for this intersection between history and fiction. According to the intuitive pre-understanding we have of this state of affairs, do we not make human lives more readable when they are interpreted in terms of the stories that people tell about them? And aren't these life stories, in turn, made more intelligible by applying narrative models – intrigues – borrowed from history

itself or fiction (drama or romance)? It would therefore seem plausible to consider the following chain of assertions: self-understanding is an interpretation; interpretation of the self, in turn, finds in the narrative, among other signs and symbols, a privileged form of mediation. (RICOEUR, 1990, 138)

While working with the ethics of psychoanalysis, it must be assumed that the narrative involves a work of listening, of interpellation and addressing the speech, that is, it always presupposes an Other. The position of the subject who enunciates, for psychoanalysis, accuses the irreducible character of the self that "tells itself" when speaking of itself, as a character in the narrated history.

"In any and all statements, the subject is, at the same time, the one who tells and the one that is told. This is for a very simple reason. For someone to be able to enunciate anything, they need a movement of language appropriation. That is, they need to be in the position of the master of their own speech. At the same time, in the argument they build, they are the object of that same speech, even if they do not recognize themselves in this condition." (COSTA, 1998)

An original alienation from the Other limits the possibility of a narrative of the reconstitution of the self, the effort to present the "I" always fails, and must be relaunched in the adventure of telling, summoning others - places, people, affections, in the composition of this "unfounded" story, a fiction that is produced and does not cease to be failure, hesitation, stumbling and also production, creation. Because the most flawed part of the story of this "I" that is told, is precisely that of its constitution, there is an essence outside itself, which psychoanalysis points out as impossible to access via consciousness, seeing as:

"No doubt the true / is not the ego. But that is not enough, for one can always fall into thinking that the ego is only a mistake of the /, a partial point of view, the mere becoming aware of which would be enough to broaden its perspective; sufficient for the reality which has to be reached in the analytical experience to reveal itself. What's important is the inverse, which must always be borne in mind - the ego is not the /, is not a mistake in the sense that classical doctrine makes it a partial truth. It is something else - a particular object within the experience of the subject. Literally the ego is an object - an object that fulfills a certain function which we here call the imaginary function." (LACAN, 62-63)

Lacan situates the radical eccentricity of the self in regard to the subject as a crucial point of Freudian psychoanalysis after 1920. According to this perspective, the narrative montage of the "I" is a partial and

temporary work. The fullness of the narration of this self is always unsuccessful because it implies a time prior to the subject, a time of immersion in the inapprehensible social-language, of which it is an effect.

“The “I” who begins to tell its story can tell it only according to recognizable norms of life narration. We might then say: to the extent that the “I” agrees, from the start, to narrate itself through those norms, it agrees to circuit its narration through an externality, and so to disorient itself in the telling through modes of speech that have an impersonal nature. Of course, Lacan has made clear that whatever account is given about the primary inaugural moments of a subject is belated and phantasmatic, affected irreversibly by a *Nachträglichkeit*. Developmental narratives tend to err by assuming that the narrator of such a narrative can be present to the origins of the story. The origin is made available only retroactively, and through the screen of fantasy.” (BUTLER, 2015, 73)

Often times, albeit partial, this narrative is also barely intelligible, difficult to be described by narrative means. By recognizing the fundamental importance of the construction of self-narratives, as well as the partial, fictional and often necessarily fragmentary character of these constructions, when dissociations are radically imposed, for example, in traumatic events, this work gained shape and foundation.

In the construction of visual narratives, this space of presentation/testimony of the lives of each person in the city of Porto Alegre was sought after, a work that involved the exchanging of stories, in rounds of conversations, of the singular paths taken in the city. This other place had been assumed, the addressing of the video letter, a group with similar characteristics but with presumed differences and knowledge, as an imaginary support for this narrative construction.

To make a gathering of elements of well-lived and living existences: speaking, recording, editing, writing, narrating, transmitting and also erasing, renouncing, silencing, forgetting, opposing to the infinite of memory, the finitude of what was said/written/recorded. To move the fringes of time, producing memories and lapses, supporting the assembly (and also the downfall) of this self-narrative, which is also a narrative of the city, produced while in stride.

2 ABOUT A WORK PROCESS: VIDEO-LETTER CARTA DE PORTO ALEGRE (LETTER FROM PORTO ALEGRE) (2004)

The idea was to make a video showing the city of Porto Alegre to homeless people living in São Paulo, sellers of the OCAS magazine³. It would be the realization of a correspondence hinted at at for a

³ NGO whose main project is OCAS Magazine, commercialized by homeless and extremely socially vulnerable people.

long time, and the video project derived precisely from an interrupted correspondence. In this case, I was a kind of unsuccessful mailwoman. At the end of 2002 I was already working with the team that was producing, along with the homeless, the newspaper *Boca de Rua*. As I was about to travel to São Paulo, I commented on my absence and that I would most likely visit the OCAS magazine headquarters. I asked them if there was something they'd like to know about the people involved in the project, or about the magazine, and I was surprised by the countless questions that came up for me to take there: *How do they buy drugs? What are they doing in order to get rid of drug addiction? Do they help each other? Do they have solidarity with one another?; How is prison in São Paulo? Do they have the right to visitation?; Do they sleep on the streets? How did they find themselves on the streets?; Did the brigadians (their way of calling the military police) attack them there too?; What types of drugs do they use? Crack, marijuana, loló?; What do they do with the money raised by the selling of the magazines?; Don't they think that their speech is missing in the magazine?; How long have they been working on this project?; Do they like to work on this project?; Does the magazine have an association, a cooperative? Does it have any support?; Do they live in shelters like the ones in here?;*

The questions gave rise to broader commentaries about the city of São Paulo, such as the following statement: *in São Paulo people truly die*. The imagery of a distant city, the assumption of similarities and differences, left me very stimulated, as there was a potential communication channel opening up. However, arriving in São Paulo, I realized that I had forgotten the questionnaire. Nevertheless, I made contact with the magazine's organizers and found its vendors in different parts of the city. In the conversations with them I realized that the interest in *Boca de Rua's* work was also great, and that some people already knew about the existence of the newspaper by its presence in the World Social Forums.⁴

When I returned to Porto Alegre, the idea of the video letter came up clear, marked by the group's willingness to exchange experiences, and also by listening to an imagery of a city full of singularities, fears, desires, powerful in transmitting the many experiences of the cities within Porto Alegre or São Paulo. I realized that the newspaper *Boca de Rua* discussed the city all the time, but at that period, the text, impregnated with the necessary denunciation, sometimes impoverished its critical reflection, and whoever approached the group realized that its content and form could do with a creative leap. Why not

⁴ The World Social Forum is the main international annual meeting to think/discuss alternatives and ways of confronting the current models of globalization of neoliberalism and capitalist imperialism. It took place for the first time in Porto Alegre, in 2001, and continued to be hosted there annually until 2005, and then on to other cities. In the first event, the multiple themes were gathered around the main axes: a) the production of wealth and social reproduction; b) access to wealth and sustainability; c) the affirmation of civil society and public spaces; and d) political power and ethics of the new society. The newspaper *Boca de Rua* began to circulate in this first event, gaining strength and visibility, and making an active presence in all other meetings, which included coordinating conversation circles and workshops..

invent and eclipse the city with these perspectives, producing outlooks of the city that would represent each member of the newspaper? These images would have an address, a commitment to transmission, a way of producing engaged to the experience. Making a visual letter was a choice for literally including a point of view, for giving contours, shapes and reflexivity to the imagination, as well as transmitting it.

Despite being another medium, the initial process of the video was very close to the creation of the newspaper's texts. In a circle, we would talk about the urban experience and about establishing images of the city. We decided early on that the video would be about the city of Porto Alegre and would not address only the world of those living on the streets, because all involved agreed that, in the city, the different socio-economic realities and subjectivities are related, even if unintentionally.

The challenge that was posed from the beginning and that accompanied the whole process was to find images that, when sent to a foreigner, could transmit a little of the way of living in that city. To let those places in the city which do not often coincide with the tour guides appear, for they were formed from a unique perspective, as if it was a transmission of a look: the corner of República Street in that gap from which you can see, from above the viaduct, a tip of the Redenção park. Therefore, it was also the transmission of a certain time of that place. This process involved delicacy and some difficulty, since it was about recognizing the collective relevance of an outlook that is unique. What validity would this image/outlook have regarding the image of a city? A little bit with Marco Polo, from Calvino's *Invisible Cities*⁵, a little with Walter Benjamin's

⁵ Marco Polo responds to the Emperor of the Tartars when he asks for a precise location of the city he described "(...) I shall repeat the reason why I was describing it to you: from the number of imaginable cities we must exclude those whose elements are assembled without a connecting thread, an inner rule, a perspective, a discourse. With cities, it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed, but even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear. Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else." (CALVINO, 1993, 44)

dodgers or Baudelaire/*Flâneur*⁶, at the time it was important to break with the idea of the city with a sole thought, a symptom of the capitalization/gentrification of the spaces within the city, and to uphold those figures who resisted being flour to thicken the mass of “passers-by”, and, on the contrary, hindered the transit of the increasingly segregative senses and ways of living.

With a markedly poetic narrative, committed to conveying the stumbles to which an anonymous and staggering person is susceptible to in the city, I now read what I wrote while questioning whether it was possible to do it in that same way again. Incredulous of that possibility, I realize that the city is different, and, above all, we are distinct. Distinct in moving around the city, distinct in being Others in that city. In 2004, a concept known as Broken City was common in the *Boca de Rua* newspaper, a dichotomy between those who had the conditions to move freely within the city and those who were charged with credentials to transit in apparently public spaces, such as galleries, shopping centers, and even on certain streets. Soon enough, some security guard, previously invisible to me, would appear while I was being accompanied by members of Boca de Rua, as if the product of some magic, and inquire us about who we

⁶ A reference to the text “On some themes in Baudelaire” in which Benjamin writes about Baudelaire’s work, mainly about his poetic prose, in regard to Paris at the end of the 19th century. Throughout the text, he envisages the figures brought by the poet, like the *flâneur*, with other figures-characters of writers of the same period. The peculiarity of Baudelaire’s writing encourages Benjamin to think about the obsolescence of nascent modernity in the image of the metropolises, the characteristics of a “modern” model of subjectivation, with new modulations for perception and social relations. “Despite everything”, the poet’s attempt to create poetry from the increasingly machinic streets, transmits a sort of shadow of his time, himself a character who inhabits this time willingly, but restless.

“(…) For one thing, it tells us about the close connection in Baudelaire between the figure of shock and contact with the urban masses. For another, it tells us what is really meant by these masses. They do not stand for classes or any sort of collective; rather, they are nothing but the amorphous crowd of passers-by, the people in the street. This crowd, whose existence Baudelaire is always aware of, does not serve as the model for any of his works, but it is imprinted on his creativity as a hidden figure.” (BENJAMIN, 1994, 113)

“To endow this crowd with a soul is the very special purpose of the *flâneur*” (1994, 113)

“(…) is no doubt a phantom crowd: the words, the fragments, the beginnings of lines, from which the poet, in the deserted streets, wrests poetic booty.” (BENJAMIN, 1994, 113)

Les Fleurs du mal (The Flowers of Evil), a work by Baudelaire, is considered by Benjamin to be “the last work of lyric to exert influence in the European sphere” (1994, 143) and even questions the possibilities for the existence of lyric poetry. By quoting the prose poem “Loss of the halo”, Benjamin does not recognize the *flâneur* in the writer: “The semblance of a crowd with a soul and movement all its own, the luster that had dazzled the *flâneur*, had faded for him. To heighten the impression of the crowd’s baseness, he envisioned the day on which even the fallen women, the outcasts, would readily espouse a well-ordered life, condemn libertinism, and reject everything except money. Betrayed by these last allies of his, Baudelaire battled the crowd - with the impotent rage of someone fighting the rain or the wind. This is the nature of the immediate experience to which Baudelaire has given the weight of long experience. He named the price for which the sensation of modernity could be had: the disintegration of the aura in immediate shock experience. He paid dearly for consenting to this disintegration - but it is the law of his poetry. This poetry appears in the sky of the Second Empire as “a star without atmosphere.” (BENJAMIN, 1994, 145)

were and what we were doing in that space. Sometimes we were asked to leave; sometimes we were escorted to the place we wanted to go to (like a cinema inside a shopping mall, for example). At that same time, it was also on the newspaper's agenda the topic of places prohibited to those who, at the time, were known as *ties wearers*, understanding that being in a gated condominium and always circulating in a car was also a way of being away from the city, a prisoner in some way. The poetics in this context were a strategy of trying to search for the grooves in that partition, and what other spaces were made through this open crack, which of the places' youths we could reach in this video-letter, if we looked for sections in those extremes.

At the beginning of this work, the Broken City was clear through the representations that appeared in the choosing of the places to be presented in the video. The first ones coincided with the tourist guide, even though they were places rarely frequented by the group: the Sunset Overlook at Guaíba Lake, the Street Market at Redenção, the Historic Center, the museums, the university. When I inquired about their circulation in those spaces and the singular reason (that is, what each of them could say about those spaces), the life on the streets appeared through the conversations: *mocós* (an urban term for shelters made by the homeless), bridges, sidewalks, the town center and, mainly, some places that assisted them by providing food, soup kitchens, religious collectives. Only later on, in the course of the project, did the diversity of places increase, and the routes/dislocations around the city, specific to each member of the group, also became a focus of interest for the study. However, all the while, there was resistance to talking about their places of birth, and it seemed like there was a barrier, a symbolic wall that divided their lives in the before and after resorting to life on the streets; their places of childhood were warded, difficult to access.

Then, a house appeared in a district of the city called Restinga. The House of D. was so spoken about that anyone who knew *Boca de Rua* through the video-letter project imagined there to be the newspaper's headquarters. This house was a stopping point for several members of the group. D. had been at Boca for over 2 years and was brought there by her two daughters, P. and M.. She, in turn, brought in three more daughters - A.P., T. e M. - and a granddaughter - E. - daughter of P. *Boca de Rua* became a large family chain. Because P., M. and A.P. had friends and boyfriends who were members of *Boca*, who frequented that house with their own friends who also passed through *Boca*, and every now and then, someone from *Boca de Rua* was there in Restinga. That was the first house, the first sign of intimacy in the face of city monuments or *mocós*.

In the first reports, a paradox was constant: in the city perceived as a lawless territory, without owners, no man's land, some places classically understood as repellent to conviviality, made for car traffic,

almost opposing to human bodies, gained a narrative outline full of references to intimacy and protection. As stated by B., during a conversation: *"I lived my childhood in the Bat Cave. My childhood was there, at the Bat Cave"*. And also, P. reports: *"The only thing I wish was for the Bat Cave to return. There never was a place like that again"*. This enchanted place, which was able to allow B. to live out his childhood, was almost a toy hut. Only with real structure and in an unusual place. It was next to one of the Trensurb (Porto Alegre's urban train system) tracks, under a very busy viaduct, near a central bus station, in the north-center of the city. The average speed of automobiles on those roads is 80 km/h, that is, it is impossible to envision a house under that roadside. This place was also remembered by P. and N.. Within the group, the Bat Cave was reminiscent of a past temporality, according to N., a time when there were still groups on the streets: The "dog gang", the Bat Cave crowd. In the reports, it became a mythical place, between leaving home and the life on the streets, an experience of the city outside their neighborhood of origin, but also protected from the frightening anonymity. There they set up an apartment, with a full kitchen, a bedroom, a living room.

Afterwards, a waterfall brought to the video-letter a more remote type of childhood, far from the city center. P. recalled the waterfall in which she, her sisters and her friends bathed, in Restinga, in the middle of a forest that, at the time of this work, could still be found there. This populous neighborhood - it has as many people as an average city in the interior of the state - is in the South Zone of Porto Alegre and will be constant in the descriptions, memories and stories during the video process. She said we could not go there nowadays, as it was privatized; *"the owner has firearms and wouldn't like to see us there. If I weren't accompanying you, you might not be able to find it because the waterfall is well hidden"*.

Even without knowing that waterfall, J. seemed to hear in detail the rumble of water hitting the rocks of the hill, as P. had brought him the memory of the countryside behind a pottery factory in the Sarandi district, where he had played in as a child. It was a kind of artificial lake, made for the factory's use, in which children bathed, hidden from the workers. The forbidden place became challenging. He remembers that the neighborhood in the North Zone of the city was almost an open field, with few houses around the pottery factory: *"Sarandi was a rural area of the city. There, livestock was raised and there were a lot of fields. We played in the fields all the time. Nowadays everything is different. There are a lot of buildings built there and everything is like a city"*.

The lake of the Pottery and the waterfall of Restinga have in common this aspect of places discovered by intimacy. As with a beloved body, in which signs, small wrinkles and tender points are gradually discovered, a space also requires a certain intimacy to get to know it. And nothing better than childhood, where the boundaries between bodies and places are still unclear and extensive, to unravel in them the

alleys, waterfalls, artificial lakes and squares. These are spaces for socialization and experimentation, in which relationships are expanded, and from where the original images of adult life are harvested.

Some squares have also been reported as frontier places between childish playfulness and street life. I. grew up in a small square in São Geraldo, in the North zone of the city:

That's how it is back there, you know? I grew up there since I was a kid and there was this other small kid that was raised with me on the streets. There I didn't get sick, and it was like a home to me because there, I had everything. I had food. In the mornings, an "aunt" came and brought food for everyone. Later in the afternoon they came, brought us coffee to drink and after that, around midnight, we had blankets, everything, and we'd sleep. We even made a tent in that square. And the boys who went there to skateboard all knew us, they'd say to us - hey man, what's up! Do you want to hang out back home anytime, play some videogames? - And we'd go... that's how it was back there. And another thing is that there, in any bar that we'd go to ask for something, they didn't say things like - go work! Go steal, so you can eat! - No, there they'd go and give it to us.

Of those intimate places, the *mocós* are a threshold between the public and the private, a space of the house and of the street. In a *mocó*, all of this exists on the slab of the street, on the bridges and monuments of the city. Intimacy with the street itself, a place for being, an almost home, a Bat-Cave. During the period when the video was being designed, there was almost no mention of *mocós*, or at least not any specific *mocó*. The Bat-Cave was a named, mythical *mocó*. The other *mocós* were always "the *mocós*", as if they were any other place. But as the project progressed, we were introduced to some other *mocós* and we understood that several of the participants would like to showcase their *mocós*, so we went on to visit some of them, but recorded none.

The project lasted three months until the camera was introduced to it, first to experiment with it and then to start producing the images. We would talk while looking at the city map and tracing, from it, the most visible stories, impregnated with the images that the camera was unable to capture. This extended time, of waiting before recording, was precisely to provoke these images: paradoxically, the absence of a camera seemed to have been necessary during this period.

The presence of Evgen Bavcar was very inspiring at that time in Porto Alegre while thinking about the close, but sometimes too easy, relationship between image and imagination. This Slovenian photographer, settled in France, blind since he was 11 years old, understands the materiality of images and bodies (as stated by him: *The tactile touch remains the sense of truth, since it cannot deny the materiality*

of things⁷). In a singular way, due to his physical limitations and his passion for worldly things, Bavcar affirms the images by their absence. It is his pre-images, as the matrix of his work is called, that he photographs. Mental images, which are formed before the one that materializes on photographic paper, or on the digital camera's display.

They are made from the memories of the images seen and the words that make up new arrangements for the lived/remembered. An agreement made by him between word and image, two categories that are only dissociated by this attachment to dichotomies and categorizations, but which, on the plane of imagination, coexist fully, although always tensioning one another.

So the initial project, without the video camera, was an attempt to make the images appear before the places. We would discuss: what are the necessary images of the city? Space-time for sensations that were added to monuments, places, in the terminology of Certeau (1996), provide spaces:⁸ *In this sense, space is a practiced place. Thus the streets geometrically defined by urban planners are transformed into space by walkers. In the same way, an act of reading is the space produced by the practice of a particular place - a written text* (1996, 202) as in A.'s speech about Matriz Square,

"I would make an image of freedom, as if I were on the highest hill and could fly: on one side the church, on the other the governor's palace, on the other the assembly, the palace of justice, (and I ask: what is it? Justice? What is it?). There, sleeping in those streets between them, I found a little friendship, I found freedom, peace."

Still in the beginning of the work, I began to bring a map of the city so that we could visualize the places we were talking about. Sometimes we would work literally on top of it. The idea is that, while we were talking about the places to be shown, the map would be streaked with the chosen routes. I took different colored pencils and imagined so many other maps that would be formed from this intervention. Memory maps.

We encouraged the participants to write, drawing the paths taken by each one of them, over the lines already drawn. But what appeared were small dots, with colors very similar to those used for the official markings of the map, thus making these features almost invisible. One time I spoke up about it, asked if they were shy about drawing on the map we were using or if they were shy about drawing, in a representation of the city, their own paths. Even though I knew that these alternatives would be inseparable, I received a direct answer from C.: *the city is not mine. The city belongs to the rulers.*

⁷ BAVCAR Evgen. *A luz e o cego (The light and the blind)* IN The zero point of photography. Catalog of the homonymous exhibition at the Sotero Cosme gallery of the Casa de Cultura Mário Quintana in Porto Alegre, 2000.

⁸ CERTAU, Michel de. *The Practice of Everyday Life: arts of making*. 2nd ed. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1996. p. 202.

The feeling of not belonging to the city, or of not having their own place in the city, was constant: while being in the wrong place, while living in the wrong way, at all times someone was reminding them of that. So, the invisibility of their presence on the map accompanied the attempt to make their presence on the city street invisible. For those living on the streets, invisibility is both dangerous and necessary. A camp must be discreet, someone sleeping on the sidewalk must be invisible to outside eyes, as this is the only chance to try to escape the interventions of police officers, rangers, security guards, who invariably repress the action - with varying degrees of violence, depending on the acting government and the corresponding command of police brigades, and remove all personal property of those on the streets (a mattress they managed to acquire, the clothes they had, a stray pot or pan; in short, their belongings).

Most of these places marked discreetly on the map spoke of the trajectory of life on the streets, places in which they had lived for some time, and not infrequently, were chronological journeys from the leaving of their homes, on the peripheries, to the town center, the destination place of everyone I spoke to, when they decided (willingly, or, most of the time, out of necessity) to leave home.

There is an abrupt cut at this point of leaving home. Some did not speak of that other life lived at home, on the periphery, far from the center. Through the paths travelled towards the center, with brief stops in squares, or flaps of buildings, they tell some of their stories of origin, births to another life, often changing their names. The town center is described as a place for anonymous socialization, where the origin can and, most of the time, must be reinvented.

Among the places spoken of by all, the strong perception of the streets and alleys of the city center in the constitution of each one's experience was evident, as in the expression of G., 7 years old: *XV Square is the most wonderful place because it is beautiful!* For a passerby visiting Porto Alegre, this square can be seen as a place in the city polluted by the noise of one of the most densely populated areas in its center, in addition to being near one of the main urban bus terminals, a lot of commercial areas and little living space. There were still some trees from the original project, which dates from the beginning of the 19th century, its space greatly reduced throughout the 20th century, with the square radically changing its ambience at that time. Even so, it was a place that concentrated many differences and a kind of festival of chance, between the sounds of street workers, the comings and goings of the city center's invisible professions (prostitutes and various types of illicit businesses), and the children felt particularly attracted to it.

The town center was turned into an image of the possibilities of existence beyond the determinisms of family conditions, in meetings promoted by the street and whose identity is shaped by this experience, as said by A.P. *In the city center everyone is the same, there in Restinga everyone wants to be a prep or a*

playboy. When I went to school, I put on my best clothes, but they kept saying that I always wore the same ones, they called me dirty, lousy. In the center everyone is the same, they don't mess with you. The project of the video-letter occurred while very marked by this urbanity of the town center and its surroundings. I share some memories of the recording moments of the video-letter, a few of them, which fit the page limit.

3 SPACES-NARRATIVES

3. 1 FESTA

XV Square

The XV Square is one of the oldest squares in Porto Alegre, its first project dating from the beginning of the 19th century. After undergoing countless transformations, including resizing, its area has greatly decreased. In this square there is no lawn, there is no swing set, there is no fountain. It is surrounded by so much visual and sound mix that one can pass right through it without realizing. Except for the Chalé da Praça (Chalet of the Square), which has the beauty of old buildings, and for some trees, also old and leafy, it draws attention mostly because it shelters a colorful sea of stalls belonging to street vendors, in which everything is sold. There was music everywhere: in the Chalet, Brazilian songs were being played; in the stalls, a multitude of songs mixed themselves with conversations on the vending circles of herbs and ointments, with many people walking quickly towards the plaza of the Public Market.

Perhaps more than in other places, in XV Square it was difficult to find an object to focus on. F. spent some time looking at the place with an open camera, to later record it. Even so, we could not find a stationary point. At all times, the camera continued to chase after the numerous simultaneous events. A rush of police officers invaded the space hosting the stalls and F. ran in that direction. We could see, then, a legion of children who came out of somewhere, running with sticks after the confusion, among the tents. They were between 4 and 8 years old, were all together, and when we first got to the square, they apparently weren't there. Afterwards we understood that they were there all along, we just didn't see them. Were they already part of the square?

Minutes later, when returning from the disturbance with the police, the children took over that space which seemed so difficult for us to focus on. They offered themselves for the camera in such a way

that the square was limited to them. F. tried to clear them off, asking for some time, but they all wanted to “appear on TV”. There were at least fifteen children and adolescents dominating XV Square.

They seemed older, sometimes frightening us with that adult gaze on a child’s body. But the image of the square, populated by those children, without adults surrounding and preventing exchanges between them, was like that of a party. For they were, above all, playing. A legitimate children’s party. Where they could even experience the adult space, in that carnivalized, deformed way of the miniaturized adult. This place is a little reminiscent of street parties, from all ages. 7-year-old G., still in the video project, said: *XV Square is the most wonderful place because it is beautiful!* And M.V., 21 years old: *Square XV divides the city into two sides, it’s truly like a heart.*

3. 2 FEAR OF THE DARK

Alfandega Square

Very present in the representations of Porto Alegre, it is known as the Square of the Book Fair, which in other times had been a place of literary-artistic meetings during the evenings. Today, there are still traces of past times, a line of shoeshines, chess tables, a handicrafts fair, and is surrounded by the city’s museums. An overlap of times that coexist.

But the nights in this square are not as lively. Or rather, they are no longer for anyone. F. and I arrived around 8:30 pm. The craft stalls had already closed and the museums were keeping their doors half open. There was still some movement of people, at the center of the square, who seemed to be passing through towards their own appointments. Within it, under the trees, on the benches of the square, a strange sensation of suspense passed through us. A woman wandered around a bench alone, looking at us elusively. As she noticed our presence, she looked away. She walked further away when we approached. F. called her, telling her about the video and she responded, very aggressively, that she did not want to appear in it. She then left to the other side of the square, insulted.

Sitting on a bench, with a bag full of things at his feet, was a 50-year-old man. I greeted him as I passed him by, and he replied, smiling. F. returned and invited him to speak about the square for the video-letter. In Castilian, he said he would be happy to do it. Argentinean, he was in Porto Alegre after a season in São Paulo. He said that he dreamed of seeing the landscapes he had already seen in photographs. And that he chose Alfandega Square due to it being a safe place to sleep, but it had been the second place he’d sought for since being there. The first was XV Square. Despite it being very beautiful, he said, the rowdiness there did not let him rest.

The Argentinean gentleman really did seem to find rest in that place in which we could not be calm. There was a strange atmosphere, perhaps too nocturne for that time of night. We walked glancing at all sides, and people seemed to hide among the bushes, above all not looking directly at us. They would lower their eyes or turn away. F. wanted to try for another interview, now with a couple who seemed to be on a date under the trees. The gentleman went straight to the point: *look, if I were you, I'd leave here with this camera, because there are already a lot of people looking at it, there was this guy around who almost mugged you...*

Even before, we knew that something was wrong. Alfandega Square had never looked more frightening to me. I realized that I had never been inside it at night. It was a place of passage for me as well as for those people who walked through it while coming back from work. The square was populated with people who did not (or could not) be seen.

After that warning, we remained on the square for a while longer. We walked nearby Rua da Praia (Beach Street), where there was intense movement. People disassembling tents, conversations on the street, bystanders. Still on the square, where it makes a corner with that street, several people gathered around chess tables. We decided to register that motion, that somewhat clearer part, in which the square seemed penetrable. But we received another warning, now from a young man, who somewhat frightened me, and I responded with an aggressiveness that only that place could produce in me: *Look, they're saying around that you guys are from the FBI... the people here in the square don't like to be filmed... if i were you, I'd leave before anything happens.*

I explained to the young man that we were making a movie about the city and we were filming Alfandega Square, and not focusing on the people, they were not even showing up properly, as they were merged with the landscape. I insisted for him to look at the pictures of the square with us, and I deleted all that, from a distance, could identify him. F. was surprised by my reaction, as we were being threatened directly. Afterwards, while remembering the scene, I was also surprised. In the end, the young man complied with our presence and said we didn't need to delete the images, that he would like to participate in the video. We said our goodbyes, and F. could breathe a little better after we left. Due to that reaction, we understood the instrument of power that we had in our hands. Indeed, a video camera can document things that should remain invisible, and we like the shadows. Some practices, when brought into the camera light, lose their meaning, or gain other meanings not always desirable for those who appear in it. Some lights are deadly, invisibility can often protect, and we knew that.

3.3 WINDOW

Bat Cave

I didn't really have a childhood. My childhood... I don't know if it was very sad or very happy... I know that whenever my mother took me to daycare I'd cry a lot, I didn't want to stay in daycare... to me, in my thoughts, my childhood wasn't very good... but I remember that I really liked to ride the bus... I'd leave the house, ride the bus, then come back... I also played in squares (...) my real childhood was sleeping in the Bat Cave... it was a mocó... a hole inside the bridge... we had everything there... on the streets we had music, television, we even had a refrigerator under the bridge. But then the city hall came and took everything away... and closed it, put cement on it for us not to go there anymore...

No other *mocó* was described to us during the entire video project besides the Bat Cave. And, in fact, it has not existed since 1999, when the City Hall closed due to it being a risk area. I had been hearing about this place ever since I arrived at *Boca de Rua*. It was a reference for remembering the childhoods of B., P., C., N., M. in addition to many others that I did not get to meet. It seemed like a mythical place, such was its organizing force, of time and space, as P. said: *"the only thing left from there is our own memory... some have died, others are imprisoned, others are so aimless, that not even we know where they are anymore"*.

We arrived at the bus terminal and climbed through a small viaduct that leads to the freeway. We walk at least 100 meters between cars, as there is no road shoulder there. C. guided us and did not understand our fearful steps. He walked undaunted, eager to arrive at our destination. He would point out several alternative paths and some hiding places in other points of the viaduct (such as an entrance at the junction of this viaduct where drugs were stored, or a protective screen near it, the spot of injectable drugs users). He showed us small holes in the asphalt that served as light and air entrances for those who lived down there. A phobic sensation hit me as I imagined people residing under the road. I pictured the heat, the noise, the shortness of breath, the strange challenge of resting one's body under an endless stream of automobiles. It seemed very contradictory that B. spoke of this cave as the venue of his childhood, and I was surprised by the nostalgic animation with which C. showed us this refuge.

Before descending to what was left of the Bat Cave, C. located the electric power pole from which they pulled an extension to the Bat Cave. They had a television, sound system, everything, as he told us: *We had everything in there, that's when the police started to envy us and decided to take us out of there. Then the City Hall came and ran us off and sealed off the place.* He told us of how the administration and coexistence took place in that space. Everyone woke up at 5 am with the ringing of the natural alarm clock, which was the first line of the train that left at that hour from the center of Porto Alegre towards the city of São

Leopoldo, and passed by the Bat Cave. They shared all spaces for sleeping, eating, watching TV, as they occupied a small tunnel under the viaduct where, in other times, a freight train would pass, transporting the goods which arrived at the port. In fact, when we went down a small ravine to get to Bat Cave, we were able to see the beautiful view from the inside: the port and the open horizon of Lake Guaíba. Down there I could feel a little of that feeling of spaciousness that I had been hearing about for a long time at *Boca de Rua*, due to the possibility of abstracting the asphalt when looking at the horizon.

But that feeling was brief. Soon we left with two security guards threatening us, guns drawn. They said that that roadside was a private area, a port area, and that we were trespassing. After the scare and a lot of conversation, we also had to hear from those men that C. had "the face of a crook" and that that horizon had an owner. The memory of Bat Cave was narrated as this undefined place within the public-private categories. And as a childhood space where these barriers are, in fact, undefined.

3.4 DISTANCES

Salgado Filho Airport

A. had expressed three dreams since I'd met him, two years before recording the video: learning how to read, getting a formal job, and flying by plane. It was this last dream that he chose to transmit through images of the city. While we were planning the video, A. told us he slept for long time on a lawn in front of the airport. From there he'd see the planes taking off and wondered what it was like to fly, to be up there, to see from above. He would imagine this from afar, as A. had never entered the airport.

It was a surprise, for him, to learn that he could go through the airport's front door. We went to observe the planes that were preparing to take flight. Me, him and L., another member of the newspaper *Boca de Rua*. Once again, his fascination for the place stood out when looking at the camera. A. wanted to convey the amazement of his gaze towards the airplanes. He needed to speak of what he had imagined, about the years of his life in which he flew while standing still, in the same place: *I'd stay there daydreaming, watching the planes*. At certain times, the planes would switch to the background and A. would look into the distance, at the hills he saw in the background. A plane would take off and he would watch it, gaze tracing the sky. He'd like to be there, he said, and at the same time revealed his fear of flying.

As we left the building, I asked to see the lawn from which A. used to watch the planes. He already seemed happy with the new interior perspective of the place, to which he never had access to. Yet, he accepted to continue on to the place that was our starting point. We walked down the street for about

fifteen minutes until we saw a large flower bed dividing the avenue. There was a lot of rustle coming from the car flow nearby, which for me was out of step with the tranquility that the place transmitted to him. It was, he explained, that there was a place where he could rest without worrying about his things and also where he could be alone for as long as he wanted. As for the noise, he said that a tired body doesn't care much about it.

The image that A. wanted to convey was, in the foreground, a large fence. In the background, with some effort, you could see a plane. A. was looking, actually, at the airport workers, who prepare the planes for the flight. He said to me: this is the kind of work that we can only see from afar, outside the fence. I would rather say that this is a type of work that is not really seen, unless one has the time to lie down in front of an airport screen in contemplation. Unless one's entrance through the main door is forbidden. Unless one does not travel on the plane but instead looks at it from a distance.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

During the working process of the video-letter, we made a choice of method, based on an ethics prompted by psychoanalysis and inspired by cartographic and ethnographic works, we let ourselves be guided by the possibilities, interests, paths of the team of the Newspaper *Boca de Rua*. We were not interested in producing a video-letter if it was not the product of a collective construction work that would in fact have an interpellation effect on the production of unique narratives about the city.

It was built collectively in all stages: script, recordings, assembling, editing. So it was also a job that always admitted the possibilities of failure, of not existing as a product, or of the project having a complete change of direction. I believe that the possibility of bankruptcy also inspired a collective effort to invent a form, the "video-letter" medium, which welcomed the singularity of looking at the city as a narrative element that could present the city in which they lived, and in some way, present their own lives and the lives of others. P. once said: *What you are doing with us is a kind of biography of each person, only through the places where we've been.*

Once finished, the video-letter was displayed in different locations, usually featuring the presence of its directors to narrate/discuss the process and the content of the video. It also reached its destination. C., a member of the group, took the video-letter "Letter from Porto Alegre" to show to members of OCAS Magazine, in São Paulo. The delivery took place during an event denouncing the impunity of the people accused of ordering a massacre that killed seven homeless people, with repeated blows to their heads, at Praça da Sé in São Paulo, in 2004. There in São Paulo, C. left an invitation for the group of vendors of

the OCAS Magazine to respond to the video and to continue what was insinuating itself as a network of videos about cities. But to this day, that has never happened.

Boca de Rua continues to exist as one of the main newspapers circulating in Porto Alegre, with content made exclusively by narrators/reporters with a very unique city experience. It is also an important source of income for its members and a possibility of social mobility with another kind of legitimacy.

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