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Open screenplays in search films*

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Abstract

We will discuss in this text how characters of the films *33* (Kiko Goifman, 2002) and *Olhe pra mim de novo* (Kiko Goifman, Claudia Priscilla, 2009) handle the “risk of the real” (Comolli, 2008) in the course of these documentaries filmmaking, signaling to the construction of open screenplays which arrive at the time of shooting without prior definition of what will be recorded as image and sound in different planes, scenes, sequences. To do so, we follow methodological trails proposed by Aumont and Marie (2009) about “film analysis”, bringing them to the notions of “search documentary” (Bernardet, 2005) and “documentary reading” (Roger Odin, 2012) to thus realize the search for family as a challenging issue in the films in question.

Keywords: Fiction. Documentary. Open Screenplays. Search Documentary.

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“At the risk of the real”

In the chapter entitled *At the risk of the real*, of the book *Voir et pouvoir. L'innocence perdue, cinema, television, fiction*, Jean-Louis Comolli (2008, p.169-178) vehemently defends documentary films in contraposition to fiction films or at least with fiction films that deal with closed screenplays, restoring the concept of the cinematographic production that encompasses societies and individuals according to the logic of the market. Quoting him:

Our phantasies and desires are structured as screenplays. An invisible hand aligns the processes that supposedly lead us. Societies slide slowly during the representations – theatre of the institutions, comedies or tragedy of powers, spectacle of the relationships of strength – to that of programs: from the scene to the screenplay (COMOLLI, 2008, p.169).

However, according to Comolli, there are forms of resistance to the principle of the screenplays that regulates everything according to ideologically questionable interests. These forms of resistance find a privileged place in the documentary, to the extent that it is prone to face the real reference of the scene, with all its fissures, risks, incompleteness and chances, which end up revealing themselves in the reality of the cinematographic inscription. This is not the case of disregarding any and all fiction, but rather to take it into consideration regarding its commitment with the documentary. Despite that, the author considers the Neo-Realism and the *Nouvelle Vague*, for instance, “two turnarounds in cinematographic writing [...] responsible for the renovation of fiction in the form of documentaries” (COMOLLI, 2008, p.170). And he also refers to some filmmakers that in the most recent cinematographic productions create fiction renewed by the documentary, namely Abbas Kiarostami.

To Comolli (2008, p.170 – Emphasis ours), Kiarostami “teaches us ironically that nowadays what presses us is no longer a ‘new inscription of reality’ but rather the *reality of the inscription* (Close-Up, Through the Olive Trees)”. One of the effects of this type of proposition is that the spectator faced with the documentary does

not find a fixed place. On the contrary, one finds a kind of ambivalence that makes one want to believe in the scene or to doubt it, taking into consideration a real reference. Thus, the “dialectic of doubt and belief is created” (COMOLLI, 2008, p.171), which defines the spectator’s place as something indefinite, unstable, movable and also critical.

These filmmakers’ screenplays and their films, built at the risk of the real break away from the anticipated framework, contraposing themselves to the totalizing screenplays: “Far away from the ‘totalizing fiction of the real’, the documentary film is given the opportunity to devote itself only to the fissures of the real, of the thing that resists, of what is left over, the refuse, the residue, the excluded, the cursed part” (COMOLLI, 2008, p.172). Undoubtedly, here there is a political option that takes into consideration the subjectivities involved in the projects of various documentaries, the possibility of reformulating the world, so as to make it less pragmatic and closer to the human praxis and to human bodies.

To film real people in a real world means to be involved with the disorder of their lives, with the undecidable of world events, with the part from the real that perseveres in deceiving the anticipations. Impossibility of the screenplay. Documentary need (COMOLLI, 2008, p.176).

In contraposition to the documentary, according to Comolli, fiction becomes more and more phobic, especially for fearing experimentation, the fissures and the unexpected at the limit, always replacing the same world instigated by the consuming interest of the entertainment society.

The entertainment society triumphs, but an obscure portion of the entertainment undermines it as a whole. Let’s call it ‘the part of the art’. Nowadays, more than ever, its role is to represent the strangeness of the world, its opacity, its radical otherness, summing up, everything that fiction around us scrupulously conceals from us: we are in a period after the destruction of the closed groups, when the scene is open, split, broken, and it is at this price that it intends to represent *historically* [emphasis ours] everything that is not virtual in this world (COMOLLI, 2008, p.178).

Having summarized the premises that are part of the issues that highlight both the documentary and fiction, which are renewed by the contact with the documentary, according to Comolli's proposal, the issue at this moment concerns a trend of the contemporary Brazilian film, namely to work under the perspective of open screenplays, in the limit between fiction and documentary. And to confirm this hypothesis, we would like to propose a debate on two documentaries that are inscribed in the scope of these two issues: 33 (Kiko Goifman, 2002) and *Olhe para mim de novo* (*Look at me again*, Claudia Priscilla and Kiko Goifman, 2009).

We have analyzed these two films according to Jacques Aumont and Michel Marie's recommendation (2009), to whom the work of the film analysis is to make the film talk. This means that each one of these documentaries triggers an analytical process – image, editing, sound, testimonies, narratives or the combinations of these possibilities, indicating the specificity of each analysis. This issue is useful for understanding the way that the narrative organization enables the discussion proposed here, namely: what is the meaning of the search for the characters of the films being mentioned? How do the documentaries present this process? How does the character/achiever (in 33) and the characters in (*Olhe para mim de novo*) manage the “risk of the real”, while creating an open screenplay?

Symptomatically, these filmmakers have meaningful interlocations with Jean- Claude Bernardet (as we will see later during the discussion about the films). Beforehand, it is worth informing that it is the general idea of the “search documentary” (BERNARDET, 2002; 2005) that will be highlighted within the problematization of the open screenplays scope. In principle, this idea of search documentary was presented by Bernardet especially because of 33. Later on, he expanded the corpus of his observation, including Sangra Kogut's film, *Um passaporte húngaro* (2001) (*The Hungarian passport*). Quoting him, “the two films are quite different but they share a point in common, which is what I would call search documentary” (BERNARDET, 2005, p.143). These are films that stem from the personal projects of their filmmakers, who have

become characters of their own searches. In the case of 33, the director who had been adopted as a child, searches for his biological mother. In *The Hungarian passport*, the director, a descendant of a family of immigrants living in Brazil, goes in the search for one reason – a passport – that will give her the possibility of recovering her history. Curiously, in the two cases, there is the general idea of the risk problematized by Bernardet in his text, which to a great degree approaches the perspective of the “risk of the real” proposed by Comolli. In Kiko Goifman’s case, as Bernardet says:

The risk was that the project could harm his good relationship with his mother, in case his mother – his foster mother, his real mother – did not like this project. [...] In Sandra’s situation, the major risk was not the fact that her Hungarian nationality would be denied (she is Brazilian). She feared that the Hungarian bureaucracy would require her to renounce her Brazilian citizenship (BERNARDET, 2005, p.148).

Bernardet’s text, when compared to Comolli’s, further suggests another dimension of the risk of the real that could be problematized. In other words, some documentaries may be more prone to the risk of the real than others. This is not the case of making a detailed digression of documentary different genres or taxonomies. However, it is worth remembering Roger Odin, when he admits that there is a “*scale of documentary and levels of what can be documented* [emphasis ours], which can be appraised in terms of the number of levels necessary for the construction of a real enunciator: to put it in another way, there are documentaries that are more “documentaries” than the others” (ODIN, 2012, p.27). This text written by Odin is inscribed within the scope of the problematization about the limits between documentary and fiction, proposing the degree of reference to reality as one of the factors to be considered within the scope of the possible oppositions between the two fields. The distinctive factor would be defined by the level of reading performed by the spectator, the type of image built about the film enunciator, considering the origin of this enunciator as inexistent or fictitious (“imaginary reading”) or real (“documentary reading”). In other words, in the documentary

reading, the reader builds the image of the enunciator presupposing one's reality. In this case, even faced with a fiction film, the reader or spectator can adopt documentary reading techniques, taking into consideration, as revealed by everything that can be found before the camera (stage scenery, landscapes, costumes, actors) as a real enunciator, amongst many other possibilities (the film director, the cameraman, the producing company etc.). Moreover, in terms of scope, the documentary reading can also refer to the film as a whole or to only some of its segments. And to attempt one or the other reading, either the documentary or the fictional, the reader must take into consideration the instructions that were given by the film itself, as a part of the documentary of fiction group:

It can be perceived that we are talking about the documentary group and not about the documentary genre; the fact is that the concept of genre seems to be at a lower level than the distinction that we are trying to make here: in fact, as there are genres in the groups of fiction films (western, police detective film, musical comedy, etc.) there are also genres in the modality of documentary: ethnographic films, industrial films, scientific films, etc. (ODIN, 2012, p.23).

Also according to Odin, we can perceive that the two types propose instructions based on the structure of their styles, involved in subgroups. Taking the documentary type and the subtype of the “pedagogic film” into consideration, for instance, there is the role of the specialist (the professor or researcher holder of the knowledge), who will finally rely on schemes, charts or similar for his/her explanations. In the subgroup of the “news story film”, the direct sound is often chosen with the direct interpellation of the interviewee etc. However, the author continues, there are films in which the instructions are hybrid or ambiguous, or that is to say, they are placed in the intersection between two or more groups or subgroups, without giving instructions clearly.

We have then reached a point that presents itself as a sustainable hypothesis for the reading of films that are the focus of our analysis. In other words, it is possible that *33* and *Olhe para mim de novo* (Look at me again) give ambiguous instructions about their relationships with the fiction and documentary groups at

the risk of the real. Moreover, it is also possible that the idea of “search documentary”, proposed by Bernardet in terms of 33, finds a correspondence in fiction films¹. It is even more probable that the documentary and the fiction of search find in the subgroup of the road movie a stimulating place of intersection, since the two films give reading instructions in this direction.

33

The film directed by Kiko Goifman begins with an epigraph quoting Dashiell Hammett: “I’m one of the few – if there are any more – people moderately literate who take the detective stories seriously”. And then, thanks to the soundtrack and night images of the city avenues in slow motion in black and white, it begins a noir record to be reinforced by the director’s voice over, informing us that he is 33 years old, that his foster mother was born in 1933 and that he will have 33 days to discover who his biological mother is:

I have chosen a roundabout way. I went to some detective offices to ask for hints. There my conversion into a compulsive distrustful person began. I created a method and based on it, I had only 33 search days. Investigations in the mornings and afternoons; in the evening, I pursued images, the dim lights and the empty spaces.

Although the screenplay is signed (as shown by the opening credits) by Kiko Goifman and Claudia Priscilla themselves, the first locution makes it clear that in reality what has come into play in 33 is a shooting method whose course will be determined by the demand of the filmmaker in the search for his biological mother. The trip begins in São Paulo, where we will hear the

¹ The possibility of establishing a connection between documentary and search film is suggested by Jean-Claude Bernardet (2010), on his considerations about the film *Viajo porque preciso, volto porque te amo* (I travel because I need to, I come back because I love you) (Karim Aïnouz, Marcelo Gomes, 2009). It is worth noting that this film, which was forged based on the documentaries previously filmed by the same directors, was acknowledged by Maria Cristina Couto and Michelle Marcelino as a “search fiction” (2010).

testimonies of detectives instructing the protagonist of the story, Kiko, how to conduct his search. The detectives recommend various procedures. And they are criticized by the voice over that organizes the narrative, for their lack of ethics. Person and character, the documentary filmmaker takes action. He travels to Belo Horizonte by car, accompanied by his wife, who drives the car (Claudia Priscilla, the co-screenplay writer, also a person and supporting character of the film).

In Belo Horizonte, we will see and hear various testimonies, especially of the family that adopted the filmmaker when he was still a newborn baby: Berta (his foster mother) is the first one to talk about the adoption, but his aunt (Eva), his sister (Márcia) and the Nanny (Conceição) are also present. Subtitles are inserted between the testimonies with different purposes: to make comments on the scene, make advances in the narrative, establish an enigmatic tone that is typical of the detective novel. Kiko and Claudia's subjective viewpoints in the car are also inserted between the testimonies or interviews, while heading through the streets and avenues of the street, in the pursuit of information that can clarify the mystery of his biological mother. And the time that is passing by is a fact to be confirmed by the graphic intersection that enumerates how many of the 33 days have elapsed from this or that scene. The director-character explains his investigation strategies. He talks to the spectator and presents the information that he received from those who interact with him through the internet, since the project had an interactive dimension, so as to involve investigation helpers.

"I would never go to TV programs where people search for their relatives, but a contemporary detective has to know how to use the Communication media as a weapon. I agreed to give an interview", says the director-character. In the aforementioned interview, which we will see later, he explains that he is the subject and object of his documentary, he admits having created a pretext for a story, and informs that he receives absurd clues from people interested in the project especially for its mixture between reality and fiction. Closer to the end of the film, there is another mass

media intersection, this time a news story conducted by Pedro Bial in *Fantástico*, a TV program of the Globo TV broadcasted on Sundays evening with a huge audience. The story of Kiko's search for his biological mother is intermingled with the limits between documentary and telejournalism, even though the subjectivity of the narrator resumes the film discourse on his side, in a way flirting with the great media (so criticized by Comolli for its closed screenplays). Nevertheless, the perspective of imprecision regarding the search of a person who is willing to take risks with his own project is reaffirmed. By the way, in his testimony about 33, Bernardet says (2002):

We can say that this is a documentary that deals with the principle of uncertainty, which is totally different from the documentary that works with stable situations [...] It represents new horizons to the documentary film [...] this is a documentary that I would call search documentary – I do not know if this is the best possible expression, but anyway the documentary filmmaker starts with a project without knowing where this project will lead him.

Olhe pra mim de novo (Look at me again)

The imprecision that Bernardet mentions regarding 33 is also the principle that guides the filmmaker of the *Olhe pra mim de novo* documentary, whose central character is Sillvyo Lucio, a male transsexual, born in Ceará backlands, active supporter of the cause for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) people. He travels through the backlands of the Northeastern Region, and on his route he meets people marked by various kinds of intolerance, and consequently, he questions the importance of the respect to the differences. The character's displacement through the road makes the documentary approach the road movie.

Several discussions on this cinematographic genre, especially in the North-American context, point to subjects that are going against the current of the social and hegemonic codes, as the recurring characters in the road movies (CORRIGAN, 1991; LADERMAN, 2002). At first we can think about Sillvyo Lucio

within this context, because by being a transsexual in a community that considers this an abnormality places him far from the socially traditional standards. Sillvyo himself highlights this aspect: “the son of a bitch is born in a woman’s body, with a man’s mentality, in an evangelical family, leaves home at the age of 16, participates in a radical student movement, the Revolutionary Movement 8th October (MR8), as an adolescent; in other words, I have always gone against the current”.

Despite having experienced in his own body the fact of not fitting into the social conventions, throughout the film *Olhe pra mim de novo*, it can be perceived that Sillvyo Lucio leads the life of any person considered “normal”. He has a female companion, with whom he intends to have a child one day; he fights for the LGBT cause; he keeps affective ties with his ex-companions and friends, and at given times in some of his discourse one can perceive a male chauvinist point of view. This paradox expressed in his actions and testimonies opens the possibility for us to see *Olhe pra mim de novo* as a search documentary. Let’s see: while in 33 the search for the biological mother is defined as a narrative axis from the beginning of the film, here the search for something or somebody is not clear from the beginning. We can perceive that there is an ongoing search. Some of the documentary episodes support this aspect. Let’s point out three of them: 1) at the very beginning of the film, Sillvyo visits an ex-companion, who has children, to whom he behaved as the children’s father, during the time they were together; 2) at another time, Sillvyo searches for doctors specialized in human reproduction to become informed of the possibility of conceiving a child with the genetic load of his ovule and of his companion’s ovule; 3) the highlight is the search for his meeting with Maria Tereza, a daughter that he had as an adolescent, before acknowledging himself as a man, and who does not accept her mother’s transexuality, Sillvyo himself.

Those episodes – all of them related to affective and familiar ties – suggest that Sillvyo Lucio’s search is then for the family. It is also worth mentioning that although those three moments are directly related to Sillvyo Lucio and his family, during his trip

there are situations when he meets people whose stories of different intolerance and prejudice also find a place of resistance and triumph over difficulties in their respective families.

In *Olhe pra mim de novo*, this search permeates the character's history of life by connecting past and future. Regarding the past, Sillvyo Lucio tries a reapproximation with his daughter Maria Tereza, who was raised by the maternal grandmother (his mother), thus revealing to us the family that he could not form. About the future, he still considers the possibility of having a child with Widna, his present companion.

Let's see how the first topic takes place, or namely, the issue of the past. The way Maria Tereza enters the narrative of the documentary is permeated by suspense. In the first moments, some clues are given to the spectator: firstly, this is someone who is being persuaded to participate in the film and, secondly, this is a female character, as we can perceive in the message left by Sillvyo Lucio in the voicemail of his companion's cell phone: "She called me, but she said that she does not know if she is going to participate in the shooting. I am leaving her at ease, but her participation is important". During the film, other messages inform us about this, until we reach one of the last sequences: the meeting between Maria Tereza and her mother, Sillvyo Lucio. This is a tense and simultaneously affectionate conversation, in which they present their different points of views. Maria Tereza accepts the fact of her mother having relationships with women, but she rejects for instance his masculine behavior and the body transformation.² Sillvyo is quite instructive in his discourse to his daughter, when he explains that his condition is not an issue of choice.

This conversation, which is a kind of climax of the film, is stressed by uncertainties and doubts. It presents the maximum point of exposition to the risk of the real that the character experiences, because by attempting this reapproximation with his daughter, Sillvyo is about to lose the control of that dialog's direction. During her lines, Maria Tereza says that she had thought

² Sillvyo Lucio undergoes a treatment based on male hormones.

about a definitive rupture with her mother, owing to their differences. That moment confirms that the relationship between search and risk is a close one, placing their characters (*Olhe pra mim de novo*) or the documentarists-characters (33) face to face with the management of the doubt as an inevitable issue.

Regarding the second topic presented above, or namely, the issue of the future, during his trip Sillvyo Lucio tries to find information about the possibility of conceiving a child by non traditional methods. His hypothesis is to combine his genetic material with that of his companion, with their biological characteristics, and then have an *in vitro* fertilization. The problem is that Sillvyo Lucio has a female reproducing apparatus, which makes human reproduction by two ovules impossible, according to the two physicians that he consulted with.

During his meeting with Maria Tereza and with the physicians, we can notice the character's effort to reestablish family ties. In the gap opened between past and future, the search is based on a displacement that does not have the meaning of an escape or flight from the *establishment*; on the contrary, the risk of the real is involved in setting up a nucleus that is considered essential for the social constitution, or namely the family. It is worth noting, however, an idea of family concept based on affection, instead of being formed by the traditional roles of genders.

Sillvyo Lucio's trip during *Olhe pra mim de novo* points to simultaneous movements related to the past and to the future. In this sense, it is worth remembering what Figueiredo points out: "the narrative of the trip [...] is a vehicle for the problematization of human being's frailty, placing at risk the certainties of the so-called civilized world" (2010, p.218). This scenario of frailties, which goes beyond the documentary at issue, presents Sillvyo Lucio's movement as a "family scape"³. Nevertheless, it builds an imprecise sense for

³ The Idea of *family scape* is defended by Katie Mills (2006) in her analysis of the film *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985). By analyzing a series of audiovisual products (especially cinema and television) that approach the theme of the displacement, she defends that from the 80's on, within the context of the North-American production, the trend is to treasure the family as a "safe harbor".

that character's displacement, which is based on the certainty about oneself and the doubt about the context that he can face regarding the other, in an effort to build a way of looking at the world that is subjective, even though totally relational.

It is further stressed that Sillvyo's contact with other families that faced (or who still face) prejudice in their daily lives (the exception is a conversation with a group of young homosexuals at a square during the evening). These are families who live with disabilities, Berardinelli's syndrome⁴, for instance, or with the trauma of having a child switched at the maternity hospital. These episodes are complex. As we can see, in the search for acknowledging oneself and for confrontation with the other, the open screenplay simplifies the meeting of the protagonist with the characters, also stressed by the idea of unfamiliarity and difference. Even the sequence of Sillvyo Lucio's meeting with the group of young homosexuals reinforces the family issue, but at this time within the context of fraternity. That group can be considered a "family", in the final analysis. Moreover, the conversation with those youths is always permeated by the role of the family in the reinforcing or rejecting stigmas and prejudices. It can thus be observed that in *Olhe pra mim de novo* the importance of the family, in a recurrent way, is once more configured around affection.

And the protagonist's trip continues, with the change of space, reinforcing the possibility defended by Trinh Minh-ha, of during the trip being faced with "beyond me, another self" (1994, p.23). This possibility bifurcates the relationship that is often hermetic between the self and the other, because during displacement we are something *to* the other, but also *with* the other.

Sillvyo Lucio's trip in *Olhe pra mim de novo* thus reveals an identification process that is directly related to the processes of spaces, thus triggering a new perspective to the national cinematographic production, far away from the one, which especially in the 90s, was interested in the "geographic exploitation of the country,

⁴ The most common symptom of this syndrome is the hypertrophy of conjunctive and adipose tissues, causing the dilatation of the blood vessels and umbilical herniations.

with a new curiosity for the human element and its vagueness doctrine” (NAGIB, 2006, p.61).⁵

Documentaries like *33 e Olhe pra mim de novo* prove that the displacement from a personal and subjective perspective reveals not only who is displacing, but also conjunctures and contexts that are important for us to understand Brazil nowadays – an aspect that is many times buried by the search of the “Brazilian way” in its more generic sense.

Beyond the complexity mentioned above, the parts in which Sillvyo talks to other families seem an alternative to Maria Tereza’s denial in participating in the shootings. In other words, if she really refused to participate in the project, there would be sufficient material collected to compose the film. This aspect, which is pointed out here as speculation, also reveals the possibility of an open screenplay, of a risk that is rather close to what we have discussed in *33*.

The reason for the search

As a conclusion, we point to a hypothesis inspired both in the observation of Kiko Goifman and Claudia Priscilla’s films and in Comolli, Bernardet and Odin’s texts, namely that it is possible to take *road movies* such as *33 e Olhe pra mim de novo* into consideration, especially from the risk implied in these search projects while facing the real.

By the way, as we have seen, Comolli proposes the interest in films that run away from the logic of the market owing to the risk of the real, of a reality of film inscription, capable of creating the spectator’s dialectic of doubt and belief as part of the art that is capable of revealing the strangeness of the world.

⁵ For more details about the search for this aspect in the cinema of revival, see the chapter “O centro, o zero e a utopia vazia: *Central do Brasil* (The center, the zero and the empty utopia. *Central do Brasil*.), *O primeiro dia e Latitude zero*”, (The first Day and Zero Latitude) of the book *A utopia no cinema brasileiro*, (Utopia in Brazilian film) by Lúcia Nagib (2006).

Bernardet perceives the risk that involves the filmmakers in the search that in the end forms the narrative and discourse of their films. This takes place both in 33, a film in which the director is also a character, and in *Olhe pra mim de novo*, a film in which the filmmakers, the characters and the staff are intrinsically related, as it is revealed by the film discourse.

Additionally, Roger Odin, in his turn, discusses reading instructions given by the film to the spectator, anticipating groups or subgroups of documentary and/or fiction that propose scaled levels of documentary or fiction reading, also in the structures of style. In this sense, it is worth stressing, as a recurring strategy of the discussed documentaries, the presence of references to cinematographic genres frequently related to fiction, such as the police detective film, the drama and the *road movie*.

Notably, one of the pioneer researchers of the *road movies*, Timothy Corrigan (1991, p.144), recognizes the “reason for the search” as one of the major characteristics of road movies. Furthermore by tracing historic trends related to the origins of the genre, at a given moment, the author establishes a connection between *road movies* and the tradition of the novel of formation (*Bildungsroman*), by stating: “the familiar is left behind or transformed through the protagonist’s movement through space and time, and the confrontations and obstacles that he encounters generally lead, in most cases, to a wiser individual and often a more spiritual or social state” (CORRIGAN, 1991, p.144). That perspective before the films being analyzed suggests that, instead of leaving it behind, the search for the characters is effectively for the family. However, it indicates the possibility of new arrangements for its constitution with unforeseen *screenplays*.

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