

2025

N.ESPECIAL

eISSN: 2184-8661

NARRATIVAS BIOGRÁFICAS E LITERACIA DOS
MEDIA DIGITAIS NAS ARTES E NA SOCIEDADE

REVISTA DE
COMUNICAÇÃO,
CULTURA E ARTES

ROTURA



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ROTURA

ROTURA é indexada em



ROTURA

ROTURA – Revista de Comunicação Cultura e Artes
Número Especial Tell.Me | 2025

PRODUÇÃO EDITORIAL E DESIGN DA CAPA

- Juan Manuel Escribano Loza (Universidade do Algarve, Centro de Investigação em Artes e Comunicação, Portugal)

IMAGEM DA CAPA

- Gnider Tam @ Unsplash

PROJETO GRÁFICO DA CAPA

- Bloco D Design e Comunicação Lda.

DIREITOS DE AUTOR

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Esta publicação é financiada por fundos nacionais através do projeto “UIDP/04019/2020 CIAC” da Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia.

ROTURA – Revista de Comunicação, Cultura e Artes é uma publicação do Centro de Investigação em Artes e Comunicação, financiada pela Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia. É publicada semestralmente em acesso aberto.

URL: publicacoes.ciac.pt/index.php/rotura
Email: rotura@publicacoes.ciac.pt
eISSN: 2184-8661

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Prefácio

Narrativas Biográficas e Literacia dos Media Digitais nas Artes e na Sociedade

Biographical Narratives and Digital Media Literacy in Arts and Society

doi [10.34623/2184-8661.2025.tell_me.483](https://doi.org/10.34623/2184-8661.2025.tell_me.483)

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Consciousness begins when brains acquire the power, the simple power I must add, of telling a story. (António Damásio, cit. by MacAdams, 2008, p. 244)

Contexto Introdutório

Num mundo saturado por informação e imagens, onde os media digitais influenciam profundamente a construção da identidade e da memória coletiva, torna-se essencial compreender como as histórias de vida são registadas, interpretadas e reconfiguradas através das tecnologias contemporâneas. As narrativas biográficas, quer sejam documentais, artísticas ou pedagógicas, desempenham um papel fundamental na mediação entre a experiência individual e a cultura, permitindo não apenas preservar memórias e conhecimentos, mas também questionar estruturas sociais, políticas e culturais através da sua reapropriação em diferentes formatos e suportes digitais.

Neste contexto, a literacia mediática surge como um eixo estruturante para a análise crítica e a produção

consciente de narrativas, capacitando indivíduos e comunidades para interagir com os media de forma ativa e reflexiva. No campo das artes, das humanidades e da educação, a convergência entre biografia e media digital abre novas possibilidades para a criação, a comunicação e a interpretação de histórias, transformando práticas artísticas e pedagógicas e promovendo formas inovadoras de participação social.

Este número da **ROTURA** reúne um conjunto de contribuições na temática das narrativas biográficas, a maior parte resultante do **Tell.Me** – o primeiro Simpósio Internacional sobre Narrativas Biográficas em Cidades de Literacia dos Media e da Informação, que decorreu em 14 junho de 2024, na Universidade de São José em Macau, China, com o elevado patrocínio da iniciativa UNESCO MIL ALLIANCE. O simpósio **Tell.Me** 2024 teve como objetivo principal dar maior visibilidade à investigação e ao tema cultural das narrativas biográficas no contexto do desenvolvimento humano, dentro dos limites éticos indicados pela diversidade cultural, visando oferecer um fórum para contadores de histó-

Artigo recebido em 2025-06-18
Artigo publicado em 2025-06-30

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Fernandes-Marcos, A., & Pereira, S. (2025). Narrativas Biográficas e Literacia dos Media Digitais nas Artes e na Sociedade: Biographical Narratives and Digital Media Literacy in Arts and Society. *Rotura – Revista de Comunicação, Cultura e Artes*. https://doi.org/10.34623/2184-8661.2025.tell_me.483

rias biográficas, investigadores, teóricos e o público em geral para estabelecer um espaço comum de discussão e troca de experiências. Uma das conclusões centrais do simpósio apontou que as narrativas biográficas podem constituir um meio de recuperar a memória, valorizar as experiências individuais e reconhecer a pluralidade de identidades e trajetórias de vida que moldam a riqueza cultural das cidades, onde Macau sobressai como território único, laboratório vivo multicultural preñado de histórias individuais e coletivas que urge registrar, recuperar, salvaguardar e dar a conhecer ao mundo.

As contribuições reunidas neste número da **ROTURA** exploram as diversas interseções que instanciam as narrativas biográficas no processo de literacia dos meios digitais, demonstrando como a fusão entre narrativa biográfica e literacia mediática contribui para o desenvolvimento do pensamento crítico, para a ampliação da diversidade de vozes e para a valorização da memória cultural no presente digital. Nos artigos aqui apresentados, as narrativas pessoais e coletivas emergem como instrumentos fundamentais para compreender e estruturar a experiência humana, na construção da memória histórica, na afirmação da identidade cultural, na reivindicação do direito à cidade ou na formação de competências digitais.

Os artigos de **Stephen Morgan** e de **Cyril J. Law Jr.** destacam a importância das narrativas biográficas para a compreensão da história e da identidade pública, revelando como a estruturação do passado e a construção da moralidade dependem da transmissão de histórias individuais. Esta valorização da narrativa como meio de formação social e cultural encontra paralelismos na obra de **Pedro Alves da Veiga**, que, através da criação artística em videoarte generativa, propõe um modelo de memória coletiva em constante transformação. Já no trabalho de **Isabel Carvalho** se evidencia o poder das contra narrativas digitais na contestação das normas espaciais excludentes e na promoção de uma cidadania mais inclusiva. A partir de uma perspectiva pedagógica, **António Maneira** e **Mónica Mendes** reforçam o potencial da narrativa digital na capacitação de estudantes para uma participação ativa e crítica nos media. No caso do contributo de **José Carlos Neves** e **José Gomes Pinto**, que a partir da obra do artista José Carlos Neves exploram a desconstrução da interface nas artes dos media e o seu impacto na perceção e interação do espectador. **António Luiz do Nascimento** e **Celso Luiz Prudente** analisam o cinema brasileiro enquanto símbolo resistência e catalisador de debates sobre direitos sociais, raça e classe.

Podemos constatar através das diversas contribuições como a narrativa biográfica assume um papel central na mediação entre o indivíduo e o coletivo, entre o real e o virtual, entre o histórico e o contemporâneo. Seja na reconstrução do passado, na afirmação identitária

ou na experimentação estética e artística, os diferentes estudos aqui apresentados sublinham a necessidade de compreender e reinventar os modos de contar e experienciar histórias, ampliando a consciência crítica e as possibilidades expressivas no mundo digital e analógico.

Breve Racional dos Artigos que Constituem este Dossier

Em “*Thick stories – an historian taking personal stories seriously*”, Stephen Morgan reflete sobre a inter-relação entre os relatos dos acontecimentos nas histórias de vida pessoais, o jornalismo e a história, argumentando que para uma reconstrução histórica plena esta deve conjugar narrativas individuais, uma análise socio-biográfica, e dados objetivos. O autor parte da metodologia de Lewis Namier, pioneiro da história prosopográfica, para demonstrar como a compreensão das biografias individuais de figuras históricas enriquece o conhecimento da narrativa histórica, permitindo uma leitura mais aprofundada dos conhecimentos. Através da análise de três figuras controversas – John Henry Newman, Charles de Gaulle e António Salazar – o artigo ilustra a importância de uma “história densa” para compreender os eventos narrados, imaginados e recordados., alertando que a ausência de uma abordagem biográfica rigorosa pode resultar em narrativas históricas simplificadas, incapazes de captar a complexidade dos processos históricos e sociais.

Cyril J. Law Jr. em “*Personal Story and Public Identity as Axis of Value Response: Lessons on Literacy and Morality from John Henry Newman (1801-1890) and Ma Xiangbo (1840-1939)*” apresenta-nos a relação entre narrativas pessoais e a formação da identidade pública no contexto da literacia e na moralidade. Com base na obra e impacto de John Henry Newman e Ma Xiangbo, o autor analisa como estas figuras moldaram a consciência pública através da palavra escrita e do ensino, influenciando o desenvolvimento da literacia moderna em inglês e chinês. O autor questiona se as vozes das religiões teístas e seus princípios morais ainda devem ser consideradas na esfera pública, particularmente em tempos de crises existenciais e reconfiguração dos valores humanistas. Refletindo sobre a relação entre media, informação e moralidade, o autor destaca como o acesso à informação e a literacia mediática podem tanto preservar os valores quanto ser manipulados para fins ideológicos. Neste contexto, as narrativas biográficas não se limitam a estruturar a identidade pessoal e coletiva, mas também servem como um eixo de resposta ética às exigências sociais contemporâneas.

Em “*Digital Counter-narratives for Inclusive Urban Spaces*”, de Isabel Carvalho, é analisado como as narra-

tivas digitais podem desafiar as desigualdades de género nos espaços urbanos, contribuindo para a co-construção do conhecimento e a promoção de cidades mais inclusivas e equitativas. Ancorando-se na interseção entre estudos urbanos, estudos de género e ativismo digital, a investigação analisa como ações digitais desafiam normas dominantes expondo e contestando as formas de exclusão presentes nos espaços urbanos, reforçando a cidadania territorial e digital.

António Maneira e Mónica Mendes, apresentam o artigo **“Developing Students’ Digital Literacy with Digital Storytelling Projects in Design and Media Arts”** onde abordam o impacto dos projetos de narrativa digital no desenvolvimento da literacia digital em estudantes das áreas do design e d média-arte. Partindo de uma abordagem baseada em pesquisa de design (*Design-Based Research*), o estudo investiga como as narrativas digitais podem fomentar o pensamento crítico, a comunicação criativa, a colaboração e a proficiência tecnológica, capacitando os alunos como criadores ativos de media, preparando-os para uma participação crítica e responsável no ambiente digital contemporâneo.

Pedro Alves da Veiga apresenta **“BioFlux: Collective Memory as Generative Video Art through Deconstructed Biographical Narratives”**, uma obra de videoarte generativa que desconstrói e reconfigura narrativas biográficas documentais para explorar a identidade coletiva e a memória cultural. BioFux integra-se no projeto Conta.Me, desenvolvido pela Universidade de São José em Macau. BioFlux utiliza entrevistas recolhidas no projeto para criar um fluxo visual e narrativo dinâmico, onde memórias individuais se entrelaçam, desafiando estruturas narrativas tradicionais e propondo uma experiência sensorial e imersiva. O artigo aqui apresentado posiciona-se na interseção entre arte generativa, identidade e memória coletiva, articulando teorias da identidade, memória fluida e práticas de literatura eletrónica. A obra BioFlux é concebida como um arquivo vivo, onde fragmentos de histórias individuais são reorganizados de forma algorítmica, refletindo a plasticidade da identidade e das memórias partilhadas.

O artigo **“Operatividade e Intermitência: Luz e Sombra na obra de José Carlos Neves. Aproximações aos Interface, Processo, Presença”**, de José Carlos Neves e José Gomes Pinto, aborda-se a desconstrução da interface nas artes dos media, utilizando como estudo de caso a obra do artista José Carlos Neves. Os autores centram-se particularmente nas peças “4 tempos para: [...]” e “Shadow Machine”, explorando como o artista isola e reformula a interface, promovendo uma abordagem crítica à interatividade na arte digital. O artigo analisa a interatividade como conceito ainda indefinido no campo das artes digitais, argumentando que a obra de Neves questiona a sua função e limitações ao deslocar o papel

do espectador para o de *spectacteur* – um agente ativo, mas condicionado pelas regras do próprio sistema. Através do estudo de mecanismos e processos na sua obra, o artigo posiciona José Carlos Neves como um criador que evidencia as tensões entre mediação, presença e ausência, sublinhando a importância da interface não como um meio transparente, mas como um elemento ativo na construção da experiência estética.

António Luiz do Nascimento e Celso Luiz Prudente, em **“A questão étnico-racial nas diegéticas do filme Rio, 40 Graus e o dilema da censura”**, analisam como a representação da negritude e da pobreza urbana no filme dirigido por Nelson Pereira dos Santos nos anos 1950 confrontou diretamente os mecanismos censórios do Estado brasileiro. A obra filmica, pioneira em retratar de forma realista o quotidiano das favelas, tornou-se símbolo de resistência cultural ao promover uma estética crítica desafiando o modelo hegemónico eurocêntrico e a narrativa idealizada de nação. A censura ao filme revelou-se não apenas instrumento de repressão política, mas também catalisadora de debates sobre liberdade de expressão, desigualdade racial e identidade nacional, abrindo o caminho para o Cinema Novo e para um novo paradigma estético no cinema brasileiro.

Os Editores

Introductory Background

In a world saturated with information and images, where digital media profoundly influence the construction of identity and collective memory, it is essential to understand how life stories are recorded, interpreted, and reconfigured through contemporary technologies. Biographical narratives, whether documentary, artistic, or pedagogical, play a fundamental role in mediating between individual experience and culture. They allow us to preserve memories and knowledge and question social, political, and cultural structures through their reappropriation in different formats and digital media.

In this context, media literacy emerges as a structuring axis for the critical analysis and conscious production of narratives, enabling individuals and communities to interact with the media actively and reflectively. In the arts, humanities, and education, the convergence between biography and digital media opens new possibilities for creating, communicating, and interpreting stories, transforming artistic and pedagogical practices and promoting innovative forms of social participation.

This issue of **ROTURA** brings together several contributions on the theme of biographical narratives, primarily stemming from **Tell.Me** – the first International Symposium on Biographical Narratives in Media and

Information Literacy Cities, which took place on 14 June 2024 at the University of Saint Joseph in Macau, China, under the high patronage of the UNESCO MIL ALLIANCE initiative. The main objective of the **Tell.Me 2024** symposium was to enhance the visibility of research and the cultural theme of biographical narratives in the context of human development, while respecting the ethical limits dictated by cultural diversity. It aimed to provide a forum for biographical storytellers, researchers, theorists, and the public to establish a common space for discussing and exchanging experiences. One of the central conclusions of the symposium was that biographical narratives can serve as a means of recovering memory, valuing individual experiences, and recognising the plurality of identities and life trajectories that shape the cultural richness of cities. In this context, Macau stands out as a unique territory – a multicultural living laboratory rich with individual and collective stories that must be recorded, recovered, safeguarded, and made known to the world.

The contributions gathered in this issue of **ROTURA** explore the various intersections that biographical narratives instigate in the process of digital media literacy, demonstrating how the fusion between biographical narrative and media literacy contributes to the development of critical thinking, the expansion of the diversity of voices and the valorisation of cultural memory in the digital present. In the articles presented here, personal and collective narratives emerge as fundamental tools for understanding and structuring human experience, in the construction of historical memory, in the affirmation of cultural identity, in claiming the right to the city, or in training digital competencies.

The articles by **Stephen Morgan** and **Cyril J. Law Jr.** emphasise the importance of biographical narratives for understanding history and public identity, revealing how structuring the past and constructing morality depend on the transmission of individual stories. This valorisation of narrative as a means of social and cultural formation finds parallels in the work of **Pedro Alves da Veiga**, who, through artistic creation in generative video art, proposes a model of collective memory in constant transformation. **Isabel Carvalho**'s work highlights the power of digital counter-narratives in challenging exclusionary spatial norms and promoting more inclusive citizenship. From a pedagogical perspective, **António Maneira** and **Mónica Mendes** emphasise the potential of digital narratives to train students to participate actively and critically in the media. In the case of the contribution by **José Carlos Neves** and **José Gomes Pinto**, based on the work of the artist José Carlos Neves, they explore the deconstruction of the interface in media arts and its impact on the viewer's perception and interaction. **António Luiz do Nascimento** and

Celso Luiz Prudente analyse Brazilian cinema as a symbol of resistance and a catalyst for social rights, race, and class debates.

The various contributions show how the biographical narrative plays a central role in mediating between the individual and the collective, between the real and the virtual, and between the historical and the contemporary. Whether reconstructing the past, affirming identity, or engaging in aesthetic and artistic experimentation, the different studies presented here underline the need to understand and reinvent ways of telling and experiencing stories, broadening critical awareness and expressive possibilities in the digital and analogue worlds.

Brief Rationale for the Articles that Make Up this Dossier

In "*Thick stories – an historian taking personal stories seriously*", Stephen Morgan reflects on the interrelationship between the accounts of events in personal life stories, journalism, and history, arguing that a full historical reconstruction must combine individual narratives, socio-biographical analysis, and objective data. The author uses the methodology of Lewis Namier, a pioneer of prosopographical history, to demonstrate how understanding the individual biographies of historical figures enriches our knowledge of the historical narrative, allowing for a more in-depth reading of knowledge. By analysing three controversial figures – John Henry Newman, Charles de Gaulle, and António Salazar – the article illustrates the importance of a 'dense history' to understand the events narrated, imagined, and remembered, warning that the absence of a rigorous biographical approach can result in simplified historical narratives, incapable of capturing the complexity of historical and social processes.

Cyril J. Law Jr. in "*Personal Story and Public Identity as Axis of Value Response: Lessons on Literacy and Morality from John Henry Newman (1801-1890) and Ma Xiangbo (1840-1939)*" introduces us to the relationship between personal narratives and the formation of public identity in the context of literacy and morality. Based on the work and impact of John Henry Newman and Ma Xiangbo, the author analyses how these figures shaped public consciousness through the written word and teaching, influencing the development of modern literacy in English and Chinese. The author questions whether the voices of theistic religions and their moral principles should still be considered in the public sphere, particularly in times of existential crises and the reconfiguration of humanist values. Reflecting on the relationship between media, information, and morality, the author emphasises how access to information and media literacy can preserve values and be manipulated

for ideological ends. In this context, biographical narratives structure personal and collective identity and serve as an ethical response to contemporary social demands.

In “**Digital Counter-narratives for Inclusive Urban Spaces**”, Isabel Carvalho analyses how digital narratives can challenge gender inequalities in urban spaces, contributing to the co-construction of knowledge and promoting more inclusive and equitable cities. Anchored in the intersection between urban studies, gender studies, and digital activism, the research analyses how digital actions challenge dominant norms by exposing and contesting the forms of exclusion in urban spaces, reinforcing territorial and digital citizenship.

António Maneira and Mónica Mendes present the article “**Developing Students’ Digital Literacy with Digital Storytelling Projects in Design and Media Arts**”, addressing the impact of digital storytelling projects on developing digital literacy in design and media arts students. Based on a design-based research approach, the study investigates how digital storytelling can foster critical thinking, creative communication, collaboration, and technological proficiency, empowering students to become active media creators and preparing them for critical and responsible participation in the contemporary digital environment.

Pedro Alves da Veiga presents “**BioFlux: Collective Memory as Generative Video Art through Deconstructed Biographical Narratives**”, a work of generative video art that deconstructs and reconfigures documentary biographical narratives to explore collective identity and cultural memory. BioFux is part of the Conta.Me project was developed by the University of Saint Joseph in Macau. BioFlux uses interviews collected in the project to create a dynamic visual and narrative flow, where individual memories intertwine, challenging traditional narrative structures and proposing a sensory and immersive experience. The article presented here is positioned at the intersection of generative art, identity, and collective memory, articulating theories of identity, fluid memory, and electronic literature practices. The work BioFlux is conceived as a living archive, where fragments of indi-

vidual stories are reorganised algorithmically, reflecting the plasticity of identity and shared memories.

The article “**Operativity and Intermittence: Light and Shadow in the Work of José Carlos Neves. Approaches to Interface, Process, Presence**”, by José Carlos Neves and José Gomes Pinto, looks at the deconstruction of the interface in media arts, using the work of artist José Carlos Neves as a case study. The authors focus particularly on the pieces “4 tempos para: [...]” and “Shadow Machine”, exploring how the artist isolates and reformulates the interface, promoting a critical approach to interactivity in digital art. The article analyses interactivity as a concept still undefined in the field of digital arts, arguing that Neves’ work questions its function and limitations by shifting the role of the spectator to that of spectateur – an active agent, but conditioned by the system’s rules. Through the study of mechanisms and processes in his work, the article positions José Carlos Neves as a creator who highlights the tensions between mediation, presence, and absence, emphasising the importance of the interface not as a transparent medium, but as an active element in the construction of the aesthetic experience.

António Luiz do Nascimento and Celso Luiz Prudente, in “**A questão étnico-racial nas diegéticas do filme Rio, 40 Graus e o dilema da censura**”, analyse how the representation of blackness and urban poverty in the film directed by Nelson Pereira dos Santos in the 1950s directly confronted the censorship mechanisms of the Brazilian state. The film, a pioneer in realistically portraying everyday life in the favelas, became a symbol of cultural resistance by promoting a critical aesthetic that challenged the hegemonic Eurocentric model and the idealised narrative of the nation. Censorship of the film proved to be an instrument of political repression and a catalyst for debates on freedom of expression, racial inequality, and national identity, paving the way for Cinema Novo and a new aesthetic paradigm in Brazilian cinema.

The Editors

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Acknowledgements

We thank CIAC – Center for Research in Arts and Communication (project UIDB/04019/2020), the Macau Foundation (projects *Conta.Me*, MF/2023/ACA/16; *Radio.Me*, MF/2024/ACA/07), and the Association ARTECH-International for their support, which was fundamental to the effort that resulted in this edition of ROTURA.

Bio

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Adérito Fernandes-Marcos is a Full Professor at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Saint Joseph, Macau, China, and Director of the Doctoral School. He holds a doctorate in Computer Engineering – Computer Graphics from the Technical University of Darmstadt, Germany (1997); an aggregate degree (habilitation for full professorship) in Information Technology and Systems from the University of Minho, Portugal (2008). He is an integrated researcher at CIAC – Centre for Research in Arts and Communication at the University of Algarve, Portugal. He was the founder and first director for 8 years of the PhD Programme in Digital Media Art in association with the University of the Algarve and the Open University of Portugal. He is the author/co-author of over a hundred articles in leading journals, conference proceedings, book chapters and scientific brochures. He is President of the Artech-International Association, a worldwide body in digital media art.

Dossier

Thick Stories – an Historian Taking Personal Stories Seriously

doi [10.34623/2184-8661.2025.tell_me.369](https://doi.org/10.34623/2184-8661.2025.tell_me.369)

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Abstract

Accounts of events, whether reportage, history or myth, are inseparable from the stories of those giving the account. This paper will look at the relationship between personal stories, journalism and history, suggesting that only an approach that includes individual stories, prosopographical detail and objective data can provide the “thick” retelling of events necessary to give a satisfactory account of events described, remembered or imagined. The argument will be illustrated by reference to three historical figures: John Henry Newman, Charles De Gaulle and António Salazar.

Keywords

History • Myth • Story • Biography • Prosopography • Namierite • De Gaulle • Newman • Salazar

Received 2025-01-13
Accepted 2025-03-05
Published 2025-06-30

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Morgan, S. (2025). Thick Stories – an Historian Taking Personal Stories Seriously. *Rotura – Revista de Comunicação, Cultura e Artes*. https://doi.org/10.34623/2184-8661.2025.tell_me.369

Resumo

Os relatos de acontecimentos – sejam reportagens, narrativas históricas ou mitos – são intrinsecamente inseparáveis das histórias de vida de quem os relata. Este artigo examina a complexa inter-relação entre histórias pessoais, jornalismo e história, argumentando que apenas uma abordagem que integre narrativas individuais, dados prosopográficos detalhados e informações objetivas pode oferecer uma reconstituição “densa” dos eventos, essencial para uma descrição plena e satisfatória dos acontecimentos narrados, lembrados ou imaginados. Este argumento será ilustrado através da análise de três figuras históricas emblemáticas: John Henry Newman, Charles de Gaulle e António Salazar.

Palavras-chave

História • Mito • Estória • Biografia • Prosopografia • Namierite • De Gaulle • Newman • Salazar

1. Prologue

When he published *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, in 1929, Lewis Namier can be said to have invented a new kind of history, a new historiographical approach (Namier, 1929). So significant was the novelty of his method of looking at British parliamentary dynamics in the 1760s that the method became known, eponymously, as Namierite History. What then distinguished the writing of history by this Polish emigré Jew, who was then a don at Balliol College, Oxford, from what had gone before? Put simply, Namier took seriously the detail of the personal lives and relationships, insofar as they could be reconstructed from the historical sources, of the very many historical actors who were active in the parliament of 1760. He did so by looking in a structured manner at correspondence, diaries, wills, bank records etc. to build up a complete picture of the individuals and both how and why they spoke, acted and voted the way they did. This made it possible to see clearly the similarities and distinctions of the entire parliamentary class and thereby explain the dynamics of that parliament, which marked the final years of a period of *de facto* one-party rule in Great Britain by the Whigs, an aristocratic, progressive party who had supported the German Hanoverian dynasty who had replaced the Stuarts on the death of Queen Anne in 1713.

In writing his history in this manner, Lewis Namier revolutionised the received history of the 18th century in Britain and more-or-less invented prosopographical history. The word prosopography comes from the Greek word *propon*, meaning face, or mask, or person, and is differentiated from biography by the fact that it is more concerned with identifying commonalities and differences between a group of historical figures, by the detail of individual lives, than it is in telling the individual story of those lives. It is here where the writing of history comes into conversation with the subject of this publication: the interaction between story and different kinds of literacy.

2. Historiography: Stories, Myths and Histories

I write this paper as a Catholic theologian and a Church historian – with all the antecedent religious and intellectual commitments those positions entail – and as such the question of story is always in my mind. Where those stories are accounts of events recorded in the sources of Divine Revelation – that is, in Sacred Scripture (a treasure trove of stories) and in the Tradition of the Church – or in accounts of the history of the Church, and, given my own expertise, particularly in the history of the Church in

the last 250 years or so. More specifically what concerns me as I work in both disciplines is how we tell the tales of the past: how we give an account of what happened, why it happened and both how and why the individual historical actors behaved as they did. Whilst I consider this essential to the writing of history, I do not think it is really possible to meet Von Ranke's standard of writing history as it really was. ["...wie es eigentlich gewesen ist" (Von Ranke, 1885, p. VII). For the difficulty of translating this expression, and particularly the ambivalent term "eigentlich" see Gilbert (1987, p. 393).] I also recognise that antecedent religious commitments can both help and distort work as an historian. They can help the historian to take seriously the religious commitments of figures from the past who themselves were motivated by religious beliefs – what Sarah Foot has called, "the religious turn". The argument was first laid out explicitly in her presidential speech at the Summer Conference of the Ecclesiastical History Society in 2011 (Foot, 2012) and repeated in the second part of her Inaugural Lecture as Regius Professor of Ecclesiastical History at the University of Oxford that same year (Foot, n.d.). It is an argument that at its root calls upon the historian to allow for the possibility that the espoused religious beliefs and practices of individuals and even of groups or nations can be held in more or less good faith and be the legitimate basis for their acts.

On the other hand, there is always the risk that an overly attentive stance towards the religion of historical figures by historians who themselves have religious attachments can lead to a kind of confessional history. In such cases evidence may be privileged or discounted for reasons that serve neither history nor, if it is at all concerned with encountering the truth and knowing it, the religious faith of the scholar. It is important, perhaps, then for the Church historian to write as "neither a believer nor a non-believer" (Bianchi, 1977, col. 31). It is only then, I would argue, that a history can be written which allows, in the words of Mircea Eliade, an explanation of any given religious phenomenon in history "understood in its own mode of being, that is to say, studied according to religious criteria," and particularly to provide an account of those we might properly call *homo religiosus* and his or her actions, without which the history is inevitably and unavoidably inadequate (Eliade, 1976, p. 81). I further argue that there are other such personal details, personal stories which are essential to the project of writing thick history.

The fundamental thesis of this short paper is, therefore, that without understanding the stories of historical actors, including their religious convictions, self-perceptions and the dynamics of familial connections and social networks, it is not only poor history that we end up writing but no kind of history at all. What we are left

with is, at best, convenient fable or, at worst, distorting fiction. In studying historical figures with strong religious beliefs, for example, the criticism of psychologising is often allied to a cynical methodological atheism which discounts the real beliefs of those figures as genuine, good faith motivations for their actions. Thus, for example, we might be invited to take the view that King Alfred the Great can not have been motivated to produce a translation of the Bible into Anglo-Saxon by the genuine piety of a Christian king but only because of his desire to exercise control over the education of the minds of his people. This is, of course, absurd. It is certainly true that individual historical actors may have had mixed motives for their actions: the English King John's promise to take the Cross, that is to go on Crusade, in 1215 certainly owed as much to his desire to persuade the Pope to take his side in civil war then engulfing England and to the lifting of the interdict Innocent III had imposed, as it did to a genuine desire to liberate the Holy Places. But in Alfred, a King who made three highly risky pilgrimages to Rome and who followed up his victory at the Battle of Ethandune by baptising the vanquished Danish King and his entire army, after eight days of sermons on Christian doctrine, must surely have been motivated in part by his own sincerely held religious beliefs. To deny that is to replace history and even story with a kind of cynicism which serves neither to understand the past nor to make it accessible in all its strangeness to modern readers.

And strangeness there certainly is. The opening line of L. P. Hartley's 1953 novel, *The Go-Between* claims that "[t]he past is a foreign country; they do things differently there" (Hartley, 1953, p. 1). Whilst the phrase is certainly arresting, it elides over a very significance between the past and, for example, North Korea. It is certainly not straightforward to go to North Korea (and they certainly do things differently there) but, with determination, ingenuity and a certain measure of luck, it is actually possible. It is not possible to visit the past: once the moment has gone, it has gone. Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, laid out the case in his 2003 Sarum Lectures (Williams, 2005). Williams was careful to remind his audience that the undertaking in which those telling stories of the past, those writing history had to respect two points of reference or poles in order adequately to account for change and continuity. Williams identified the one pole as the radical similarity of human identity and experience, in the past and the present, and the opposite pole as the radical dissimilarity of those things. Human beings in the past were substantially the same as they are now and, at one and the same time, substantially different. Like many truths, Williams's point, once expressed, seems obvious and yet it places us under an often unfamiliar discipline whenever we engage in any kind of storytelling that moves us beyond the position of the fabulist.

To illustrate this, I want then very briefly to consider certain aspects of the lives of individual historical actors as an essential part of the necessary business of writing a "thick" history. That is the objective must be to offer accounts, whether they be reportage, history or, indeed, myth (at least in the theological sense), which attract and compel our attention in order to give us a richer understanding of historical reality, in contrast to two-dimensional, monochrome histories which allow us to be lazy about the past and therefore about the present. This notion is borrowed from the social sciences, and specifically from the work of the American anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, who developed the notion of "thick description" from the work of the philosopher, Gilbert Ryle, when dealing with ethnographic and other observational data, but here applied to the historical record, to historical sources and other data (Geertz, 1973, pp. 5-6, 9-10). In his 1968 *Thinking and Reflecting* (Ryle, 1968) and a year later in *The Thinking of Thoughts: What is "Le Penseur" Doing?* (Ryle, 1969), Ryle had proposed a two-fold structure for looking at observational accounts of behaviour. There were those accounts which were "thin", which included surface-level observations of behaviour; and there were those which were "thick", which added the necessary context to account for such behaviour. To explain such context required grasping individuals' motivations for their behaviours and how these behaviours were understood by other observers of the community as well.

It is important to be clear why this all matters. In doing so, I don't intend to be taken as moralistic or engaging in scaremongering. Nevertheless, the distorted accounts of, for example, national histories are at present fuelling a war in Gaza, another in Ukraine and extraordinarily dangerous geopolitical tensions in East Asia. All of these are made possible by thin histories which collapse important distinctions, ignore inconvenient facts and, perhaps most dangerously, allow the "othering" of individuals, groups, and even entire countries. If the events of the twentieth century teach us anything, whether in the frenzied lunacy of the Khmer Rouge, the cold, efficient murder machine of Nazi Germany or the ideological hatred of the Soviet purges, it is that our human fellow-feeling can easily give way to a callous and deadly indifference, the moment we start to define others as "other". It matters not whether the characteristics of "other" are found in the eyeglasses that betray our ability to read, or the racial and cultural characteristics that mark us out as Jewish, or the economic advantages derived from small holdings of land that reveal we are kulaks: once othered the killing-fields, the concentration camps and the gulag all become not just possibilities but ineluctable destinations for societies that have settled for de-personalised, de-humanised accounts: societies who have opted for history as slogan. One of the

jobs of the historian, the story-teller, the author, the artist, the musician, the film-maker – today to these I think we must add the game designer and the creators of digital virtual realities – one of their tasks in any society which wants to escape a nihilistic death wish, is to tell thick stories, which respect the historical, archival, archaeological and scientific data but also take seriously the stories of historical actors.

I want to make another point here. I mentioned story-tellers, authors, artists, musicians, filmmakers, game designers and digital creators for a reason. It seems to me that they are the real culture-smiths of our day; it is they who fashion the imaginative world about the past, the present and the future. These media do more to create society's impression of the past than any number of dusty archive mice than any number of archaeologists or historians. The rise of historical fiction, much of it brilliantly written and very well researched, has arguably had a greater effect on perceptions of the past than any number of scholarly monographs.

Here we might consider the impact of Hilary Mantel's award-winning Wolf Hall trilogy (Mantel, 2009, 2012) and its adaption for stage and for BBC Television. Thomas Cromwell, "a blacksmith's son, and rose to be Earl of Essex, Henry VIII's right-hand man, and minister of everything" (Higgins, 2012) has, I argue, been reinvented in the popular consciousness. He is no longer the "detestably self-serving, bullying monster" described by Simon Schama, a man "who perfected state terror in England, cooked the evidence, and extracted confessions by torture," of the documentary historical record (Wolfe, 2015). Neither is he any longer the venal schemer of Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* (Bolt, 1961), itself an effective manipulation of the public imagination, especially after the multiple Oscar-winning 1966 film adaptation, and one Mantel explicitly sought to overturn. Cromwell is now "a champion of the common man, a pragmatic businessman who eschews religious fundamentalism and fear-mongering" (Wolfe, 2015).

It may be argued that Mantel was a writer of fiction and not history. To do so, however, is to miss two important points. The first is that in her own description of her research and writing, Mantel set herself a standard that sounds suspiciously like Von Ranke's claim (Alter, 2009). The second is that whilst academic opinion might be persuaded by, for example, Diarmaid MacCulloch's immensely scholarly, subtle and not entirely unsympathetic historical account (MacCulloch, 2010), the Thomas Cromwell fixed in the public mind is far more likely to owe its overall judgement to Mantel. After all the BBC adaptation was watched by upwards of six million people in the UK alone, and it has subsequently aired in both the United States and Australia. The novels were published to critical acclaim and with the attendant high

volumes of sales. Wolf Hall won the 2009 Booker Prize and has been translated into, amongst other languages, Portuguese (Mantel, 2010). *Bring up the Bodies* won the 2012 Man Booker Award and *The Mirror and the Light* was long-listed for the same prize. Their cultural influence has been immense and with it a likely blurring of the boundary between history and historical fiction. There is a certain amount of argument about whether this matters, whether the public can or cannot tell the difference. The Australian historian Mark McKenna makes out a convincing argument that it cannot and that this does matter insofar as history matters at all, which both he and I think it most definitely does (McKenna, 2006). The quotation that springs so readily to mind here is from George Orwell's 1949 dystopian prophecy, the book *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: "Who controls the past, controls the future: who controls the present, controls the past..." (Orwell, 1949, p. 162).

Perhaps another quotation should be juxtaposed with this and one inspired not, as with Orwell, by the Nazis but by that fons et origo of the terror of ideology, the French Revolution. Surveying the newly wrought carnage of Paris in 1789, before things really got going in The Terror of four years later, the Anglo-Irish politician and writer, Edmund Burke, wrote, "People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors" (Burke, 1790, pp. 47-48). So in the remainder of this short paper, I want to look backward to three of our ancestors, who I hope will offer brief illustrations of just how the story of the individual enables us to develop a thick account of them and the influence they had and continue to have. I confess to having been more than a little mischievous, if not quite deliberately inflammatory, in selecting the three individuals. Not one of them is a figure free of controversy, each evoking strong responses, each continues to divide opinions, yet in the events imagined, events described and events remembered in the lives of John Henry Newman, Charles De Gaulle and António Salazar, it is possible to see the benefit of the "thick history" approach for which I argue in this paper.

3. Events Imagined

First is John Henry Newman. Newman was born in London in 1801, the eldest son of initially comfortably prosperous parents. In his long life (he lived until 1890) he was a university professor (or Fellow, in the vocabulary of the University of Oxford), a Church of England cleric, a theologian, a founder of educational establishments and a writer on educational thought, a poet, a novelist, a Catholic priest, a Cardinal. His theological views polarised the English religious atmosphere of his time, his conversion to Catholicism in 1845 caused scandal

and led to a complete estrangement from many of his friends and at least one of his siblings. His comments concerning his former ecclesial community led to a criminal conviction for seditious libel and his views on the direction of travel of the Church he had joined caused him to be thought theologically suspect, if not actually heretical. That he was raised to the sacred purple in his later years, and to the altars of the Catholic Church, as St John Henry Newman in 2019, whilst clearly considerably post mortem endorsement by that Church, does nothing to alter the record of a deeply controversial life.

Newman scholars are often accused of taking so seriously the intricacies of his life – and we have an unparalleled wealth of detail since his journals, kept more or less for seventy years, and his entire correspondence survive more or less intact and in print, in the 32 volumes published by Oxford University Press (Newman, 1961) – that they engage in “psychologising” about Newman, either sympathetically or otherwise. Of course, this is a fundamental methodological criticism that historians who take seriously the individual stories of individual historical actors always face and which the structured and systematic prosopography of Namier sought to answer. Nevertheless, the criticism remains. I would contend, however, that it is both possible and proper to take those details seriously and avoid the pitfall of always trying to find an explanation in this psychological factor or that.

Newman had a distinct concept of the human imagination. It is found in many of his works but in its most developed form in the 1870 philosophical work, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Newman, 1870). In short, for Newman, the imagination was not a faculty of the human mind concerned with thinking up the unreal, the fantastical. It was not about the imaginary but about making real, present in our consciousness things remembered, things intuited. He deployed this theologically to propose an epistemology in which both the individual and the Christian collective consciousness – what we might (and Newman did) call the mind of the Church – is able to take the remembered fact of God becoming Man in Jesus Christ for the salvation of the cosmos, to which we might give what Newman calls “notional assent”, that is a theoretical assent to an idea, to take that remembered fact and through the operation of the imagination to make it so real that it has the power to compel us to action with, as he says, a concrete reality present in the mind, “to realize things unseen and unknown” (Blehl SJ, 1991, p. 18), such that they make a claim upon our beliefs and actions, and, “representing as they do the concrete, have the power of the concrete upon the affections and passions” (Newman, 1870, p. 89). It would be fair to say that this idea has been hugely influential in Catholic theology in the 154 years since the work was published. It is, for example, behind the personalist philosophy of Karol Wojtyła, who resha-

ped much of the Catholic Church’s understanding of her ethical approach and moral theology in the 28 years he was Pope John Paul II.

Why is this relevant to the subject matter of this paper, however?

It is impossible to offer a satisfactory explanation of Newman’s development of this distinct idea of the imagination, without taking seriously his own account of his own story. Written in haste, some six years before the *Grammar of Assent*, Newman produced a published account of his life to date. His *Apologia pro vita sua*, (-Newman, 1864) was written to answer criticisms from Charles Kingsley, a prominent English academic and author, that Newman had been intellectually inconsistent and dishonest in his journey from Anglicanism to Catholicism. In the *Apologia*, Newman detailed the history of his religious opinions, how they had developed and how they motivated his actions. In a very particular way, an account of an event in his teenage years provides an important insight into his own story that cannot but have had a massive impact on this idea of the imagination.

Writing about his first serious religious experience, in 1816, aged fifteen, Newman recorded it as being one which freed him from “childish imaginations,” in the process created a religious landscape for him as real as it was imagined: remembered but, above all, real. It was an event which was utterly transformational for him. As he put it, “... confirming me in my mistrust of the reality of material phenomena, and making me rest in the thought of two and two only absolute and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator” (Newman, 1864, p. 4). Absent this autobiographical account of an event imagined, in the specifically Newmanian sense of recalled and made real, with the concrete power to compel action, it is simply not possible to explain Newman’s life of religiously driven commitment, the 1845 conversion to Catholicism despite the personal and academic estrangements it brought with it, let alone the intellectual process which the working out of that imagined event involved (Morgan, 2021). The price he paid for living out the consequences of his faith and the intensity which he brought to the life which that faith inspired can easily be a thin history. If the events of 1816 are taken seriously, if the reality of his imagination of the two and two only absolute and luminously self-evident beings is taken seriously, a thick story starts to become possible.

4. Events Described

The second person I want to look at is Charles De Gaulle. Born in 1890 (three months after Newman died, in fact), he lived until two weeks short of his eightieth birthday

in November 1970. His claim to greatness lies, I argue, in the opening sentence of his Second World War memoirs. He writes, “*Toute ma vie, je me suis fait une certaine idée de la France*” (De Gaulle, 1954, p. 1), “All my life I have had a certain idea of France”, and then he goes on:

Sentiment inspires me as much as reason. The emotional part of me naturally imagines France, like the princess in the fairy tales or the Madonna in the frescoes on the walls, as destined for an eminent and exceptional destiny. I instinctively have the impression that Providence has created it for success or for exemplary misfortune. If, however, it happens that mediocrity marks its deeds and actions, I get the feeling of an absurd anomaly, attributable to the faults of the French, not to the genius of the country. (De Gaulle, 1954, pp. 1-2)¹

It is not merely the fact that De Gaulle had this idea of France that makes a credible case for his singular greatness but that the idea was entirely a fiction of his own creation and yet one which by circumstance and force of character he brought about. The French, although usually translated as “I have had a certain idea of France,” idiomatically includes the literal sense “I made for myself a certain idea of France.” De Gaulle wrote this in 1948 or 1949 when he may well already have made the certain idea of France certain for himself. He had not, however, made his certain idea of France certain for France. That was to come later and specifically when he returned to power in 1958, when both the constitution of the Fifth Republic, the outlines of which he closely shaped, and more importantly De Gaulle’s way of being President of that Republic made his certain idea of France the idea of itself that France was to come to have and which, arguably, it still has. It is impossible to understand France in 2024 or at any point since the end of the Second World War without understanding De Gaulle and being able to give a thick account of his life. He is, therefore, a useful example of how we should seek to engage with personal stories when we remember events described in History.

To take but one example from De Gaulle’s long and very, very busy life, his astonishing capacity to engage and then disengage cannot be overlooked: something that appears to critical biographers – especially but not

exclusively in the Anglophone world – as little more than childish petulance, grounded in a grandiose self-conception, that caused him to leave the political stage whenever he thought he could not get his own way. Brian Crozier, for example, took the view that “the fame of De Gaulle outstrips his achievements, he chose to make repeated gestures of petulance and defiance that weakened the west without compensating advantages to France” (Crozier, 1973, p. 3). In his superb biography of De Gaulle, (Jackson, 2019) Julian Jackson however, and arguably rightly in my view, explains at least one of those gestures of petulance and defiance by reference to an aspect of the General’s life about which so many appear ignorant or see as irrelevant.

On the surface, it seems difficult to account for De Gaulle’s behaviour in the aftermath of the Second World War without agreeing with Crozier’s assessment. De Gaulle had laboured tirelessly, and against significant opposition from the other Allied Powers, for France to have a seemingly important role in her own liberation. Although there were only 120 French troops landed on D-Day, 6th June 1944, it was the General who drove the narrative of self-liberation, even to the extent of walking down the Champs Elysée in Paris on 25th August 1944, whilst German snipers were still carrying on a rear-guard action in the city and German artillery was shelling the city. Seemingly unconcerned about his own safety, De Gaulle was determined to be the first Allied leader in Paris, in support of the idea that France had liberated herself. In his speech that day, he declared that Paris had been liberated by the Free French Army, barely mentioning that the other allies had lost over 50,000 men in the ten weeks since D-Day. Recognised immediately as the head of provisional government he set about the task of holding elections and chairing the committee to draft the constitution of the Fourth Republic. And yet 18 months later he resigned, withdrawing almost entirely from public life. Certainly frustrations over the eventual shape of the constitution played a part but how could an energetic man of only 55, held in almost universal acclaim in France, take himself off to the quiet obscurity of Colombey-les-Deux-Eglises and stay there more or less out of public view for the next ten years, apart from a brief return to the fray in the 1951 parliamentary elections?

Charles De Gaulle and his wife Yvonne had three children. The eldest, Philippe, who looked almost exactly like his father, was born in 1921 rose to the rank of Admiral in the French Navy and died only in 2024, at the age of 103. He was followed in 1924 by a daughter, Élisabeth and then, in 1928 by another daughter Anne. Anne was born with Down Syndrome and grew up capable of only a single word, “Papa”. The General was devoted to her. He once observed that she was the only person in

1 “*Tout ma vie, je me suis fait une certaine idée de la France. Le sentiment me l’inspire aussi bien que la raison. Ce qu’il y a, en moi, d’affectif imagine naturellement la France, telle la princesse des contes ou la madone aux fresques des murs, comme vouée à une destinée éminente et exceptionnelle. J’ai, d’instinct, l’impression que la Providence l’a créée pour des succès achevés ou des malheurs exemplaires. S’il advient que la médiocrité marque, pourtant, ses faits et gestes, j’en éprouve la sensation d’une absurde anomalie, imputable aux fautes des Français, non au génie de la patrie.*”

the world to whom he could talk completely without a care. Those who knew him best observed that around Anne he was a completely different man: no sign of the self-conscious dignity, the hauteur that marked him even in his relations with his wife and other children. He was light-hearted in her presence, unafraid to laugh and cry, playing with her in an entirely unselfconscious manner and entertaining her with songs, dances, and pantomimes (Nixon, 1990, p. 229). By 1946, Anne was visibly weakening, frequent illness accentuated her frailty and De Gaulle spent more and more time in Colombey. In an age before antibiotics and with a weak constitution, she succumbed to pneumonia just after her 20th birthday, in February 1948.

In August 1962, by then President again and amid the strife over the French withdrawal from its colonial rule in Algeria, the General was the victim of an assassination attempt organised by the French Algerians who felt betrayed by his acceptance of the need for Algerian self-government. Most people put De Gaulle's survival down to the peculiar suspension of his Presidential limousine – and the manufacturers, Citroën certainly claimed as much – but De Gaulle himself had no doubt: the bullet that should have killed him was deflected by the photo frame with the picture of Anne in it that he carried everywhere. It seems to me that if we are to take personal stories seriously, if we are to offer a thick account of De Gaulle's sudden and complete withdrawal from public life, the part played, albeit unwittingly, by Anne De Gaulle cannot be left out of the story. Once again, without this intimately personal biographical detail, De Gaulle becomes a caricature, a two-dimensional figure and his actions the subject of distortingly reductive explanations.

5. Events Remembered

Finally, António de Oliveira Salazar (1889-1970): I have chosen him knowing only too well how even his name is something of a lightning-rod when talking with the Portuguese but I want to argue that his story, and in particular his own self-conception as necessary to the government of Portugal, is crucial to a proper appreciation of modern post-Salazar Portugal and especially so in this fiftieth anniversary year of the 1974 *Revolução dos Cravos*.

By way of explanation, in 2020 the Scottish historian Tom Gallagher wrote a biography of Salazar. Biographies of the man are not frequent in English, although common enough in Portuguese, and I was anxious to read it, particularly since it was subtitled “the dictator who refused to die” (Gallagher, 2021). After finishing the book, I successively lent it to several Portuguese friends of mine, chosen because I wanted to gauge the

reaction from people across the Portuguese political spectrum. One reader had spent some months in the Aljube prison in the 1960s, one a Portuguese socialist close to the last PS government, one a political scientist from the Centre-Right and one a member of the House of Braganza, now quite old, old enough that is to have lived through a considerable proportion of the *Estado Novo*. I asked each of them to tell me what they made of the book. I was profoundly surprised that they each began their comments with almost exactly the same expression: “This was a book no Portuguese could yet write.” Upon enquiry, every single one of them explained that Salazar was still too current for any Portuguese to write about him dispassionately. And yet, it is the duty of historians to give an account – what I have called a “thick account” – of what happened in 1974 and to do that, giving a thick account of Salazar is an indispensable prolegomenon. Accordingly, it is necessary to consider the “Old Man from Vimieiro” to illustrate part of what I want to say about accounts of events remembered.

By the time he suffered a near-fatal stroke in August 1968 (leaving Francisco Franco alone as the sole survivor of the dictators who had ruled so much of Europe in the 1930s and 1940s), Salazar had been the *de facto* ruler of Portugal for 36 years. He was already 79 and the last ten years or so of his rule had increasingly manifested the appearance of a repressive hand on a Portugal that was falling far behind even its Francoist neighbour. He was, as Gallagher says, “the dictator who refused to die”. The end of his regime – was it fascist or not? I think we make a mistake in giving it such a tidy label – followed only a few years later, after his incapacity brought Marcel Caetano to power. Caetano had little of the command of detail, energy or personal force of character of his predecessor and when, in the revolution of 25th April the *Estado Novo* regime was swept away, few mourned its passing. After a hesitant start, by November 1975, autocracy had gone and the Portuguese began to embrace multi-party democracy with an enthusiasm that kicked off what the Harvard political scientist, Samuel B Huntington called “democracy's third-wave” (Huntington, 1991).

In 2007, the Portuguese broadcaster ran a television series and poll to identify The Greatest Portuguese, *Os Grandes Portugueses*. The King who first unified Portugal, Afonso Henriques was there in the top ten, as was Luis de Camões, but top of the poll with (concerns about the methodology aside) 41% of the votes was, Salazar, who gained more than twice the number for the runner up and victim of Salazar's regime, Álvaro Cunhal. How come? How did a dictator whose regime was overthrown in a famously almost bloodless revolution only thirty years earlier top a poll for a nation's greatest? There are many reasons, of course, but somewhere in the personal story of this deeply pessimistic reactionary lies a significant

feature: Salazar's self-understanding and his capacity to communicate it as evidently true to the Portuguese.

The story Salazar told of himself and to himself was that of the farmer's son become Economics professor, who was more-or-less dragged reluctantly from his chair in Coimbra to help out a government that could not govern a nation that would not be governed. As the Portuguese historian, António Henriques de Oliveira Marques, wrote: "He considered himself the guide of the nation, believed that there were things which only he could do ('unfortunately there are a lot of things that seemingly only I can do' – he had written in an official note published in September 1935) and convinced more and more of his countrymen of that too" (Marques, 1972, p. 231). It seems a reasonable hypothesis that it was precisely this self-understanding, effectively and convincingly communicated to a nation only too relieved that the stability he had brought following the "continual anarchy, government corruption, rioting and pillage, assassinations, arbitrary imprisonment and religious persecution" (Kay, 1970, p. 26) of the First Portuguese Republic, that explains not only the begins of his rule but its chronic vigour. Furthermore, without this self-understanding, the sheer personal industriousness, attention to detail and the reputed sea-green incorruptibility of

the man becomes inexplicable and, therefore, so does the longevity of his regime.

6. Conclusion

Accounts of events are inseparable from the stories of those giving the account. This paper is really no more than a brief look at the relationship between personal stories and the writing of history. It should be taken as an historian's reflections on his craft and one which suggests that there is here adduces some evidence that only an approach that includes individual stories, prosopographical detail and objective data can provide the thick retelling of events necessary to give a satisfactory account of events described, remembered or imagined. The three individuals I have looked at show – at least on the balance of probabilities – that without such a thick account, we risk a view of the past that speaks to an illiteracy, an inability to read the past in a manner that allows us to reflect upon it soundly. I am conscious that, in a project that has looked at stories and particularly in a manner that has been concerned with different, technologically more sophisticated literacies, these observations offered from the dust of the historical archive will, at least, have made some small contribution.

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Bio

Stephen Morgan has been Rector of the University of Saint Joseph since 2020. Originally from Wales in the UK, he is an Associate Professor of Theology and Ecclesiastical History. After a career in finance in the City of London and Hong Kong, he spent fifteen years as the CFO/COO of a large not-for-profit in the UK. Returning to academic work in 2009, he read for a DPhil in Theology at the University of Oxford, where he was a post-doctoral Research Associate of St Benet's Hall between 2013 and 2015. He has been a member of the academic staff of the Maryvale Institute

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Personal Story and Public Identity as Axis of Value Response: Lessons on Literacy and Morality from John Henry Newman (1801-1890) and Ma Xiangbo (1840-1939)

 https://doi.org/10.34623/2184-8661.2025.tell_me.379

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Abstract

In the hype of multi-/inter-disciplinarity, is the voice or voices of theistic religions and the attendant philosophical moral awareness (etymologically better rendered as *conscientização* in Portuguese) still meant to be heard? Can classical tales of saints and sinners remain part of the canon of public literacy? How existential is the threat of “organised religions” or otherwise established ecclesiastical structures posed to society when they are accused of attempting to fight proxy crusades against humanitarian enlightenment under the guise of religious literature? Are tenets propounded by scholars like Gavin D’Costa in *Theology and the Public Square* (2005) to be politely bracketed when discussing perennial values? Values that responsible media strive to propagate, particularly the value of human dignity eulogised by the life exemplars of great figures in times of existential crises of whatever magnitude. With these questions in mind, this article will hearken back to the stories of two “grandees” in

the Roman Catholic tradition who left their marks on the pages of the development of modern English and Chinese literacy. Newman’s *Apologia pro vita sua* (1865) is just but one of the tactical devices for his defense of creedal integrity, while Ma Xiangbo engaged in catholicising the Chinese national ethos through educational literacy for close to half a century. We shall phenomenologically draw inspirations from their parallel vision and experience on what lends power to the medium of words and deeds in shaping informed public conscience in regard to the core values of truth, good, and beauty.

Keywords

John Henry Newman • Ma Xiangbo • Values • Media • Literacy • Morality

Received 2025-01-18
Accepted 2025-06-18
Published 2025-06-30

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Law, C. J. J. (2025). Personal Story and Public Identity as Axis of Value Response: Lessons on Literacy and Morality from John Henry Newman (1801-1890) and Ma Xiangbo (1840-1939). *Rotura – Revista de Comunicação, Cultura e Artes*. https://doi.org/10.34623/2184-8661.2025.tell_me.379

Resumo

Na onda da multi-/interdisciplinaridade, a voz ou vozes das religiões teístas e a consciência moral filosófica (etimologicamente melhor traduzida como *conscientização* em português) ainda devem ser ouvidas? As histórias clássicas de santos e pecadores ainda podem fazer parte do cânone da literacia pública? Quão existencial é a ameaça das “religiões organizadas” ou outras estruturas eclesiásticas estabelecidas para a sociedade quando são acusadas de tentar lutar cruzadas por procuração contra o esclarecimento humanitário sob o disfarce de literatura religiosa? Os princípios defendidos por estudiosos como Gavin D’Costa em *Theology and the Public Square* (2005) devem ser educadamente colocados entre parênteses ao discutir valores perenes? Valores que a mídia responsável se esforça para propagar, particularmente o valor da dignidade humana elogiada pelos exemplos de vida de grandes figuras em tempos de crises existenciais de

qualquer magnitude. Com essas perguntas em mente, este artigo remeterá às histórias de dois “grandes” na tradição católica romana que deixaram suas marcas nas páginas do desenvolvimento da literacia moderna em inglês e chinês. *A Apologia pro vita sua* (1865) de Newman é apenas um dos dispositivos táticos para sua defesa da integridade do credo, enquanto Ma Xiangbo se envolveu na catolicização do ethos nacional chinês através da literacia educacional por quase meio século. Fenomenologicamente, vamos nos inspirar em sua visão e experiência paralelas sobre o que confere poder ao meio das palavras e ações na formação de uma consciência pública informada em relação aos valores centrais de verdade, bondade e beleza.

Palavras-chave

John Henry Newman • Ma Xiangbo • Valores • Mídia • Literacia • Moralidade

1. Introduction – Literacy as Personal Apology and Self-Translation

1.1. Media output is personal apology

A Jesuit professor once advised me thus: “Never apologise for your work”. What he meant was, we are responsible for our own product, whether written or spoken, as long as it is deliverable information for a perceiving audience and a due reflection and record of one’s honest work. We account for what we have done, and not for what we regret not being able to do. And as every author or creator of *informative* or *formative* literature who eventually has to face up to the reality of having their work enjoyed or scrutinized, it is a matter of personal dignity and integrity – you vouch for what you write or say, as an honour of your life.

To draw some historical illustration, this article shall devote its attention to two apologetical figures who embody the pristine ideals of upholding personal and literary integrity at the service of humanity: the British cardinal John Henry Newman (1801-1890) and the centenarian Chinese educator Ma Xiangbo (1840-1939). Their personal stories stirred public media frenzy of their times, especially in the metropolitan settings where they flourished. But the moral legacy that they endowed the Anglophone and Chinese world and beyond deserve retelling, as the struggles they dealt with amidst rival religious, political, and epochal values can serve to encourage our modern project of media and information literacy.

1.2. The catholic and traditional sense of Information Literacy

I suppose then that is what literacy ultimately signifies: one’s ability and willingness to own up to what we read and write, holding it up to public endorsement and scrutiny. As the old adage goes: we become what we read. So, *never apologise for your work*.

But – here comes the treat – apologise I will, albeit only momentarily. What happened was, when I was first introduced to the Tell.me International Symposium in Macau that led to this article, I felt totally inadequate academically to approach the subject at hand. I am not a media man. I have given up reading broadsheet newspapers since I own my first smartphone. My personal library has metamorphosed into an unmanageable collection of dust, mites, and dog-eared tomes. *Information literacy*, moreover, was a new expression to me. My training in philosophy and theology and canon law just seemed to place me into too old-fashioned a niche where I felt not up to speed to address what I perceived to be a highly tech savvy, urban, and current topic.

So as I tried to draft a humble apology hoping to excuse myself from the task, what I gradually discovered, rummaging through the UNESCO website and Professor Felipe Chibás Ortiz’s illustrative articles explaining the indicators to Communication and Creativity, is that Media and Information Literacy is a thoroughly *catholic* and *traditional* concept: *catholic* in the sense of universal, equal, inclusive, and traditional in the sense of generative, being handed down through generations. None of us living in the present can communicate with each other without first having inherited some pre-conceived form of linguistic symbols, verbal, printed, and auricular, or some adaptable nexus and medium of information system, usually technologically assisted. Even members of the visually, auricularly, and mentally handicapped community are not excluded in the exercise of media and information rights. They are, in fact, an integral part of the literacy movement through special human intelligent effort. So I dispel my baseless mental inhibitions, and boldly proceed to share with you my thoughts openly, with my own version of “Open AI” – Open, *Agitated* or *Anxious* Intelligence.

1.3. Artificial Intelligence: challenging surprise or surprising challenge for the quest for integrity?

Another disclaimer: I actually tried typing in my proposed title into an AI engine and ended up having an absolutely shocking text matching to a large extent what I had intended to say. In fact, the generated text even quoted from my own published work to my utter amazement, while to my supreme delight and satisfaction of course. In fact, here is what an online AI software bequeathed me as a conclusion to my article:

The lives of John Henry Newman and Ma Xiangbo remind us that personal stories and public identities intersect profoundly. As we navigate our own journeys, let us embrace the axis of value response – a dance between self-discovery and societal transformation.

I could not have waxed more eloquent... Yet this is the existential challenge we face today: how shall we claim to foster the virtues of honesty, integrity, responsibility, fairness, justice, hard work and labour, when artificial intelligence can tempt academics to tip over the edge to cut corners and to resort to simply having AI substitute one’s own natural flow of thoughts. That AI generated text really hit me hard. It said all that I had in mind. But no, “get behind me Satan.” That is not my true self. This is only a false ego. A shadow. A sham me. You have my word. I will tell *me*. Not what AI thinks about me.

1.4. Catapulting from self-translation to inter-culturality

I remember well what my phenomenology professor said: “Every paper takes on a life of its own”. And I discovered around twenty years ago that this un-invented cogitative and literary life force can be most strongly felt when I was asked by the editor of a journal to translate an article of mine from English into Chinese myself. It was a nirvana experience. Before that I had never realised that there is a palpable distance between what I thought frontally with my Anglo-Saxon section of the brain and what is deep down in the other more intuitive, pictographically oriental side of me. That there is a fecund, pregnant, creative space between the Platonic *nous* and the Aristotelian *psyche* begging for the incarnation of the artistic muse in me. For the first time in my life, I ventured into a virginal literacy no-man’s land in my bilingual alter-egos, as if there are two blood siblings separated at birth finally coming to acquainting each other for the first time. The meeting of two minds of two cultural milieux in the same brain. I discovered *art*. That was how I felt. And I was definitively invigorated.

And that is how that eureka moment of translating my own work from one language into another led me on to the path of studying the two personal exemplars, John Henry Newman, the quintessential Victorian English Christian prose prodigy, and the ex-Jesuit priest Joseph Ma Xiangbo, the unsung pioneer and promotor of educational reform of modern China. The parallel imprints that Newman and Ma Xiangbo left on the literacy legacy of the cities of Birmingham, London, Dublin, Shanghai, Beijing, and beyond, are simply too important to be overlooked when we talk about the perennial impact of personal biographical narratives and public identity in the context of safeguarding the civic, personal, intellectual, and spiritual moral qualities of its citizens in city environs that strive to develop media and literacy formation.

2. Cities and Consciences

2.1. Media as catalyst for interdisciplinary exercise and humanitarian effort

Today we ride on the hype and waves of multi-/inter-disciplinarity. Universities distinguish themselves with the offering of cross-subject joint degrees. Humanities and technologies are no longer incompatible partners. The ever-effervescent dialogue between science and spirituality continue to draw inquisitive and sincere adherents. Businessmen and philosophers are no strangers anymore. Even poets team up with computer savants to embellish their work with interactive graphics and sound effects. Media

is at the service of bringing what were once considered artificially disparately trained professional people back into a cooperative dynamism. And the resultant work of such interdisciplinary projects are often the bedrock material for novel and essential information delivery for the benefit of intelligent citizens as well as for the edification of the general populace. Social media, in particular, is an indispensable tool for direct, digestible, and delectable informational feed, where city or even national authorities fear at times when these are being utilized as means of mobilizing the masses for social unrest. The use of Telegram chat groups in the city of Hong Kong during 2019 protests would be a recent example, not to mention the earlier Arab Spring movement. The innumerable poignantly telling tales circulated during the Covid pandemic are glimpses of the painful truths (and half-truths) that media could or could not deliver. These are just a couple examples.

In the age of modernity, it is an almost acknowledged situation that we do not take religiosity as the singular hallmark of citizenry, except of course in some quasi-theocratic religious states where strict governance according to manifest religious beliefs runs supreme. But certain moral qualities traditionally held in high regard and commonly taught by religious bodies, such as truthfulness, magnanimity, justice, temperance, still and should remain the core values to be preserved and propagated in the fostering of modern civic consciousness. And the highly influential role that media and information literacy plays in this *conscientização*, this conscience-bound awareness, does not go against the prophetic voice or voices of theistic religions and their attendant teachings about behaviour and cultural expectations.

Of course, it would be naïve of us to pretend that extremism does not exist on both sides. Yet the fact that there are ultra-secularism as well as anti-humanitarian factions urges us all the more to be attentive to safeguarding sound ethical principles that would steer us away from the danger of media and information manipulation. Ideologically driven politics, politicking, and cut-throat commercial competition, are known malignant forces that frequently abuse the good intention of media and information sharers.

2.2. Freedom of information and conscience: redefining secular sanctity

When I ask: Can classical tales of saints and sinners remain part of the canon of public literacy today? I do have people like brave whistle blowers who burst the burdensome bubbles of lies in mind. Because although one may not be a church goer or creedal religious adherent understood in the conventional way, I do not see any reason not to hail and hand down the sacred memory of

ordinary upright citizens who are witnesses and sharers of major events through media. And I also deem it equally important to preserve records of institutional misdeeds so that lessons could be learnt. Tales of saints and sinners. Biographical narratives fair and straight, the good, the bad, and the ugly. Many warnings have been branded as dangerous rumours by the authorities in the beginning. Had the authorities collaborated with professionals in verifying claims and made the people's right of access to lifesaving information their top priority, then perhaps we would not have had dragged the whole world down with many untold, unexplained deaths.

Separation of Church and State does not mean separation of Faith and Country. It is a matter of human dignity to have faith, even if religion is not allowed. And at the very least public polity needs to ensure that its citizens can have faith in the truthfulness of the media and information providers. I am referring to the fundamental belief in the inalienable, God-given human capacity to put our lives into someone else's hand on the basis of one's word. Word saves, if we are not self-deceitful. And so this belief goes hand in hand with the sixth and tenth Media and Information Literacy (MIL) indicators on anti-fake news training and security. As an essential tool of the educated mind, literacy is by definition broadening and all embracing, but always respectful of personal liberty and freedom of conscience, especially of one's freedom of religious beliefs and cultural sensitivities. But here comes the age-old debate: does religion still fit in in a polite society. We can all agree on the primacy of the individual conscience in freedom of expression, but what about organised religions or otherwise established ecclesiastical structures or theocratic polities? How does media and information literacy cope with the long-standing contributions of religiously themed materials visibly and palpably colouring, if not occupying, the landscape of literature, arts, architecture, and music?

We are by now not unfamiliar with the secularist position that calls for the total privatisation of religion, or, in the case of some circles in Europe, even a wholesale disassociation from its Christian heritage. Religious literacy was once the golden standard of liberal arts education. Grammar schools, choir schools, cathedral schools, universities at Oxford, Paris, Coimbra, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale, none of which thrived without having at its center Scripture, theology, philosophy, and classical studies. Yet today these places of research are still leaders in technological advancement. So it begs the question whether religiously inspired institutions and systems are really so existential a threat to humanist enlightenment and societal development. *Gloria Dei vivens homo*. The glory of God is human beings fully alive. Were there instances of church authorities or theocratic rulers attempting to fight proxy

crusades against human flourishing under the guise of imposed religious censorship, I would judge them to be cases where such ecclesiastics or clerics have actually misconstrued humanity to start with. There have always been people invested with power who mistake humanity as something to be controlled rather than formed and informed. *Distinguer pour unir*. The task of supervision is to make clear distinctions in order to unite. And this is where information literacy kicks in as the essential conditions for making personal informed decisions and not for collective volitional coercion.

2.3. The crisis of public identity in academic and religious fora

In 2005, Gavin D'Costa, the Kenyan-born Catholic theologian of Indian parentage, published his thought-provoking *Theology and the Public Square: Church, Academy, and Nation*. There he notices that in order to avoid "theological sectarianism", the discipline called "religious studies" took root in secular academies, especially in English universities.

He posits three hypothetical responses to this phenomenon.

First, "to abolish both theology and religious studies department altogether and integrate them into history, literature, politics, and so on". The author does not support this response of course.

So the second option could be to "rename theology and religious studies as the historical critical study of religion and continue what went on previously." This second response amounts to simply acknowledging religiosity as merely a social reality. Again not something which D'Costa favours.

The third and optimal response, according to the author, then, is to "allow specific starting points to flourish, label them clearly, and allow them to interact" (p. 36). In other words, to reintroduce the authentic liberal arts model to the modern pluralistic academy. Now why the tenets D'Costa propounds here concerns us? I take his analysis of the situation of the captivity of theology in the modern academia as a parallel case study of the potential plight that general religious teachings face in public media and literacy advancement. For as long as humanity can remember, religions have been the catalyst that informs and inspires, especially in the hearts of citizens in their duty to God and Nation. Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of the Scout movement, recognised religion and spirituality as a fundamental human factor which members of the Scout movement do not have to abjure but rather to dutifully foster and develop. Let me quote from a document called "The Place of Religions in Scouting – A Catholic Vision", prepared by the International Catholic Conference of Scouting:

As for religion, even if they are not aware of it, the young people we educate are the children growing up in societies that remain impregnated with religious culture. As a result of globalization, they are also increasingly concerned with other religions than those practiced by their families. (International Catholic Conference on Scouting, 2024, p.4)

So, to slightly adapt the language of the thirteen MIL indicators, my observation would be to ask, under point 5 “culture, heritage, art, sport, tourism, and leisure”, *how to channel the perennial virtues of humility, charity, wisdom of traditional actors such as religiously inspired institutions and their literature into the mainstream consciousness of media and information beneficiaries?* D’Costa’s model emphasizes an active engagement with virtues, preserving their ethical integrity without dilution. It advocates for the free and interactive integration of disciplines, ensuring the inclusion of the theologized voices of religious agents. However, this approach requires careful discernment to avoid tendencies toward insular “ghetto-making,” as such tendencies would directly contradict the unifying objectives of the MIL project.

Hence, we do not necessarily have to bracket religion in city building at all cost. Rather, MIL can be the gentle agency that better anchor religious moral virtues in the appropriate spheres of modern citizenry, especially in intellectual circles of places where the light of traditional religio-cultural elements has grown dim.

3. Media-mediated Values and Response

What then are the values that responsible media strive to propagate? What valuable, or value-charged memory does information literacy try to preserve? In the introductory section of the MIL vademecum *From Smart Cities to MIL Cities: Metrics Inspired by UNESCO’s vision* (2020), co-edited by Professor Chibás, we have on page 27 a striking observation which deserves to be quoted at length.

Today’s communicational, educational, and technological problems should not be analysed in isolation from ethics... In our times, the idea of sacrifice has become delegitimized; people are not stimulated or want to set out to pursue ideals or moral values; politicians have deposed utopias; and yesterday’s idealists became pragmatic. We are in the age of individualism, which is another Cultural Barrier to Communication, because for the author, the individualistic pursuit of quality of life, limited by tolerance, is expressed in indifference; that is, in modern life the social is not concerned enough with moral concepts. (Minaze & Chibás, 2020)

Besides the above incisive evaluation, there is also on page 31 an interesting section on multi-talents retention

as a core value which I highly recommend for further investigation.

From my reading of it, the driving principle that MIL can take to heart is the value of human dignity eulogised by the life exemplars of great figures in times of existential crises even of extinction-scale magnitude, with people like Dr Li Wenliang of Wuhan, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer of Berlin, like Thomas More of London, and many other unsung heroes and heroines of ordinary life. Popular entertainment still hails super Marvel characters, rehashing figures of Superman and Batman, mythic creatures like Godzilla and King Kong. These sell because they meet our yearning imagination; gripping epics like Dunkirk, or Diary of Anne Frank, even philosophic works like Sophie’s World, Sherlock Holmes, James Bond, Bollywood, martial arts, folklore legends, Harry Potter, etc, all feed our longing for a world with better, stronger human characters that lift us out of mundane misery.

It can hardly be contested that human life constitutes *the* core value that requires utter, unambiguous value response, and the only proper value response to the noble essence of a person is *love* – a response to the gift of life and value of an *unrepeatable* individual. One says “yes” to the affective response and that the entire self of the lover is committed to the cause of love. As Dietrich von Hildebrand explains: “A particular trait of love distinguishing it from all other affective value responses is the unique happiness that love confers, or as we could as well say, that is deeply tied to the act of loving” (*The Nature of Love*, 2009). Spousal, nuptial love and the joy of the conjugal act would be the most supremely intimate example of all. So in my estimation, media and information literacy may sometimes be misconceived to be something static and cold, to be just a meaningful arrangement and adaptation of data and facts for passive consumption. No, I think that when MIL holds on to the core value of human dignity that solicits love as the proper response, MIL is a channel of active peace-building.

4. Lessons from Two Media-Information Charged Public Personalities

The final part of this article presents the stories of two “grandees” in the Roman Catholic tradition whom I think could serve as mentors on our MIL journey. Both John Henry Newman and Ma Xiangbo left their marks on the pages of the development of modern English and Chinese ethical literacy through all the possible mediums of communication available to them at their times. The focus will be on how their personal tales intersect with their public identity, for Newman and Ma are keenly aware of their high national profiles, and so in reflecting on their

personal accomplishments and failures, and by narrating them for their contemporaries, Newman and Ma were not just casual autobiographers but faith-driven teachers of their generation who love God by edifying the souls and lives of fellow citizens through ethical literacy. Thus the key to unlocking the title of my article, the axis of value response, is in essence love – love of one’s life, love of the source of life, and love for the life of the nation. And that love diffuses itself through spreading the Catholic message that Newman and Ma tried hard doing their entire life. Their journeys spanned continents, cultures, and centuries, yet their exploration of literacy, morality, and the human condition remains relevant today.

5. John Henry Newman: In Defense of Integrity

5.1. Newman the convert

The odyssey of John Henry Newman’s life story is most notably etched in public memory by his conversion from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism. Born in 1801 in London, educated in Ealing, he is an Oxford don, Anglican clergyman, a controversialist, a poet, an “ecclesiastical agitator”, a patristic scholar, and a popular yet sensitively sincere preacher and pastor. Even today when you read his eight-volume *Parochial and Plain Sermons* (1825-1843), it can miraculously place you in his presence, and make you almost hear his feeble, silver-timbred voice and the intermittent silences between the sentences because of Newman’s penetrating insights into the human spiritual psyche. His *Oxford University Sermons* (1826-1843) are sharp analyses on the rationality of faith and culture. And his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845) is a powerhouse of theological synthesis on a par with the *summata* of the scholastic ages. Not to mention the fame and fury he attracted by the letters in newspapers, magazine articles, and published tracts he produced arguing for the position of the Apostolic Church in the State.

However, all that sterling string of elite English identities and corpus of brilliant writings suddenly got very muddled and cast in suspicion in the public eyes when his quest led him to becoming a Roman Catholic instead in 1845. His conversion was an informed decision after serious discernment and study of Christian church history. He engaged in systematic reading of the early Church Fathers, Councils, and controversies. He harnessed books and built up not just a patristic library but he himself launched translation projects to anchor and spread the knowledge found, not just for his personal enjoyment, but *for the public*. In retrospect, we can say Newman availed himself the full benefit of MIL and in turn became an almost entrepreneurial conservative/

creative contents creator. Newman is the quintessential KOL (Key Opinion Leader) of the Victorian era.

5.2. Newman writes his Apologia

The public identity that Newman had assumed during his Anglican days changed dramatically. Newman’s new Catholic identity ushered him onto the path of becoming the most prolific Catholic apologist in the English-speaking world. His most famous work, the *Apologia pro vita sua*, is still a reprinted Penguin classic that you can pick off the shelf of decent bookshops today. Why? That is because the name on the cover of the book seemed like an autobiography of the great man. But in fact it is far from being a simple biographical narrative. Newman clearly states that it is a history of his religious opinions and the position of his mind. He wrote it originally in a serialized pamphlet format in 1864 against his “Accuser” Charles Kingsley of Cambridge who thought Newman the convert to be an insincere person. As a Catholic priest Newman sprung into action to defend his name and the honour of the Catholic priesthood. Newman says in the preface:

I mean to be simply personal and historical: I am not expounding Catholic doctrine, I am doing no more than explaining myself, and my opinions and actions. I wish, as far as I am able, simply to state facts, whether they are ultimately determined to be for me or against me...It is not at all pleasant for me to be egotistical; nor to be criticized for being so. It is not pleasant to reveal to high and low, young and old, what has gone on within me from my early years. It is not pleasant to be giving to every shallow or flippant disputant the advantage over me of knowing my most private thoughts, I might even say the intercourse between myself and my Maker. **But I do not like to be called to my face a liar and a knave**; nor should I be doing my duty to my faith or to my name, if I were to suffer it. I know I have done nothing to deserve such an insult, and if I prove this, as I hope to do, I must not care for such incidental annoyances as are involved in the process (emphasis added). (Newman, 1865)

Here we see the struggle – an essentially shy man who had to pick up the courage to pour his mind in ink to dispel misinformation – to safeguard the value of truth and dignity. It was a matter of record that Newman had penned the *Apologia* with intense agony, often in tears. And the popularity or notoriety generated by the publication of the *Apologia* sealed Newman’s public identity as a moral religious force to be reckoned with. Personal stories and public identity as axis of value response. Case in point.

A decade later, in his *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, Newman gave an evocative description of what cons-

science is: “Conscience is not a long-sighted selfishness, nor a desire to be consistent with oneself; but it is a messenger from Him, who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by His representatives.” In this quote Newman makes clear that conscience is the very centre where the unseen divine voice guides and informs us. Here interestingly Newman’s teaching on conscience elevates the value of human dignity to the plane of the supernatural, and that in turn should throw light back onto the sacred mission which media and information literacy carries when MIL is by nature an operation of citizenry conscience.

5.3. Newman caring for the souls of the city of Birmingham

Newman’s public persona is much more strengthened and made credible not only by the external display of his intellectual rigor, but by the upright life he led as a dedicated religious keeping the daily routine of prayer and services as a priest in the Birmingham Oratory. If MIL targets underdeveloped cities with a higher concentration of information-deprived labour force as locales for experimentation, then the choice of Birmingham was made surely for reasons not too far from the MIL promoters. The labour boomtown of 19th century Birmingham was a crucible of industry, innovation, and social change. But the dwellers there were certainly not comparable to metropolitan citizens in places like London marked with proliferate literacy. But does Newman have a preferential care for the less erudite ones? Let’s see for ourselves from a letter of 1864:

The Oratory, Birmingham: July 25, 1864.

Dear Monsignore Talbot, – I have received your letter, inviting me to preach next Lent in your Church at Rome to “an audience of Protestants more educated than could ever be the case in England.” However, Birmingham people have souls; and I have neither taste nor talent for the sort of work which you cut out for me. And I beg to decline your offer.

I am, yours truly,

JOHN H. NEWMAN. (Newman, 1865)

Newman’s life exemplified the axis of value response. The intricacies of his personal life story of conversion accounts for his Catholic public identity, creating a dynamic tension. He championed education, literacy, and the pursuit of broad-minded knowledge that places theistic faith back at its center. For Newman, literacy was not mere informational transfer; it was a moral endeavor – an invitation to encounter divine truths and the splendour of humble service and sanctity.

5.4. Newman takes a stance on literacy and morality

Before we turn to Ma Xiangbo, however, we must not forget a special episode in Newman’s life that pertains directly to the rationale of media and information literacy. In 1841, four years before Newman became a Catholic, Newman published a series of seven letters in *The Times* newspaper under the pseudonym Catholicus. They were Newman’s personal and public response to what was meant to be a rather harmless event: the opening of a free, open access reading room in Tamworth, Staffordshire by the then British prime minister-to-be Sir Robert Peel. The intention of Peel was the propagation of “useful knowledge”, the physical sciences generally speaking. And Peel was of the mind that the citizen who come into broader, easier contact with the created sciences would become more virtuous as a result. Newman finds fault in this notion of Peel’s. Newman argues that there is a fundamental flaw in the belief that secular education is all that it takes to drive moral excellence. Knowledge alone cannot be the be all and end all substitution of religion as a moral force in society.

Newman writes:

Man is not a reasoning animal; he is a seeing, feeling, contemplating, acting animal.

The heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination, by means of direct impressions, by the testimony of facts and events, by history, by description.

If virtue be a mastery over the mind, if its end be action, if its perfection be inward order, harmony, and peace, we must seek it in graver and holier places than in libraries and reading rooms. (Newman, 1865)

These quotes reflect Newman’s Christian anthropology, his views on education, virtue, and the circumscribed role of knowledge in shaping human character. So we see that Newman had long had to grapple with outlining the fundamental philosophical principles at work behind literacy initiatives, so that we may not confound accumulation of objective data with moral excellence, the latter of which is not to be severed from the aid received from revealed religion and the personal formation of conscience. And Newman adds:

But if we commence with scientific knowledge and argumentative proof, or lay any great stress upon it as the basis of personal Christianity, or attempt to make man moral and religious by Libraries and Museums, let us in consistency take chemists for our cooks, and mineralogists for our masons...

No legislator or priest ever dreamed of educating our moral nature by science or by argument. (Newman, 1865)

So here lies the supreme irony of the Reading Room project: while Robert Peel wanted to welcome all people without distinction of classes and creeds to benefit from this scientific literacy promotion, Newman exposed the bigotry and illogicality that belies the whole business – women of lesser virtues were not included as intended readers:

However, the Tamworth Reading-room admits of one restriction, which is not a little curious, and has no very liberal sound. It seems that all “virtuous women” may be members of the Library; that “great injustice would be done to the well-educated and virtuous women of the town and neighbourhood” had they been excluded.

A very emphatic silence is maintained about women not virtuous. What does this mean? Does it mean to exclude them, while bad men are admitted? Is this accident, or design, sinister and insidious, against a portion of the community? **What has virtue to do with a Reading-room?** It is to make its members virtuous; it is to “exalt the moral dignity of their nature;” it is to provide “charms and temptations” to allure them from sensuality and riot. **To whom but to the vicious** ought Sir Robert to discourse about “opportunities,” and “access,” and “moral improvement;” and who else would prove a fitter experiment, and a more glorious triumph, of scientific influences? **And yet he shuts out all but the well-educated and virtuous** (emphases added). (Newman, 1865)

In plain words, Newman is saying, if Peel is right and follows through with the logic of his principles, then putting libraries in red-light districts should automatically make prostitutes virtuous...So the lesson for today is, media and information literacy is not a magical formula to solving moral evils in the world while MIL can surely be a privileged means to a noble end when it does not claim to override the role of spiritual and religious agents.

6. Ma Xiangbo: Mind and Soul of Modern China

6.1. From the Imperial Mind to the Republican Heart

Bridging from the West to the East, let us look at Ma Xiangbo. If you have ever watched Bernardo Bertolucci’s mesmerising drama film, the Last Emperor of China, then you would have already a pretty good glimpse into the sort of Sitz im Leben or historical scenery that Ma Xiangbo lived in. You may remember from the movie the figure of Emperor Puyi’s English adviser and friend, Mr. Reginald Johnston. Well, in fact, it was Ma Xiangbo who was the original candidate to be invited to mentor Puyi on account of his academic standing as a polymath

and polyglot (My own grandfather met Puyi in person once in Guangzhou).

When Ma was only a young man the French authorities in Shanghai had already intended to hire him as a secretary and interpreter. But Ma famously said, “I did not learn French to serve France. I learnt it to serve China”. So at the end Ma turned down this somewhat prestigious if not odd offer to be the tutor of the dethroned last emperor of China. And that happened in 1913, the year after Ma Xiangbo was appointed the Rector of the Peking University and wrote a letter to Pope Pius X petitioning the founding of a Catholic University in Peking, which later became the Fudan Catholic University as we now know it. 1913 is also the year he laboured for the founding of a national Chinese academy patterned after the *l’Academie française*. In fact, a decade before that, in 1903 and 1905, Ma had already founded two other tertiary educational institutes, the Aurora College and Fudan College, which is present day Fudan University in Shanghai. The established educator was already 72 years old when he took part in the Republican Revolution that ended the Manchurian dynastic rule in China in 1911. Ma Xiangbo was even appointed the Foreign Affairs Minister of the Jiangsu Provincial Government, with Jiangsu being where new Republican capital Nanking is located.

Ma Xiangbo was a vocal champion for religious freedom and civic education. His patriotism was in full display during the onset of the Japanese occupation when he made use of his stature to call for unity against military aggression. He organized campaigns and broadcasted speeches up and down the country to rally support for the war relief effort. For his safety, his family and associates secretly moved him out of the Chinese south-west border, and so unknowingly he died in Vietnam, aged 100. He famously quipped, “I’m like a dog that only knows how to bark – I’ve been barking for a century and I still haven’t been able to awaken China!”

6.2. The former Jesuit

But besides being an educator and national patron, Ma Xiangbo was a Jesuit priest turned diplomat, financier, newspaper sponsor, entrepreneur, orator, scripture translator, and philanthropist. Going back to the early half of his life, Ma, like his brother Ma Jianchong, abandoned the Jesuit vocation in 1876. Ma Xiangbo’s departure sent shockwaves through the entire line of command from Shanghai to Paris, reaching finally to the Jesuit Curia. One superior wrote: “It is sad that, despite attempts on both sides to ameliorate the soured relationship, Father Ma, so gifted yet strong-willed, was

quickly denounced as a fugitive and apostate...a lost sheep...whose desertion is more lamentable than the persecution of infidels in the mission...". It triggered a radical review of policy and attitude towards the admission of Chinese students into the Society of Jesus.

Ma Xiangbo then embarked on his diplomatic career as an ambassadorial attaché to Korea, Japan, the US, France, Italy, and the UK. From 1901 to 1905, in mere five years, he and his brother published the first modern analytical treatise of the Chinese language, Ma Xiangbo then published a Latin grammar, a philosophy textbook, translated a full commentary of the harmony of the Four Gospels, and founded two universities along the way as we mentioned.

Newman basically grew up along with the developing constitutional democracy of Victorian England and its political ascendancy as an unchallenged world power. The birth of Ma Xiangbo, by contrast, coincided with the first major blow to the integrity of the Qing Empire with the outbreak of the First Opium War in the 1840s (Britain's sovereignty over Hong Kong was proclaimed in 1841). China literally grew old and frail during Ma Xiangbo's life time, and when Ma died aged 100 in 1939, the Japanese army had already occupied vast swathes of Chinese territory in the north-east and even blockaded the British concession in Tientsin. But his personal story of conversion from a disappointed ex-priest in the French enclave in Shanghai to a model Catholic centenarian steadfast during national crisis, was one not just of cultural synthesis between Chinese tradition and Western thought, but a living testament to the power of the word as a means to respond to the value of faith and national salvation.

6.3. Ma Xiangbo the public moral orator

On 7 May 1916, at age 77, on the occasion of the centenary celebration of the American Bible Society, Ma Xiangbo was invited to deliver a long speech in the Central Park of Peking, which is formerly the grounds of the Imperial Altar of Earth and Harvests (*Shechitan*). The title of the speech is *The Relationship between Sacred Scripture and Human Community*, and the text that survived contains more than twenty-four thousand characters. A contemporary report describes the occasion for this speech as a large event with the air of almost a fanfare:

Thousands of people attended the meeting. The various Christian bodies met first in groups at various points of the city and then marched to the Central Park...The American Legation band furnished the music...Many visitors to the park also attended the meeting (The North-China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette, Shanghai, 13 May 1916).

The thrust of the speech is to exhort people to adhere to the moral precepts of biblical teachings as the sure path of personal and national salvation. Ma began by appealing to the common natural human intuition of an all-powerful, all-wise Creator. Then he argues that it is because of mankind's misuse of their sovereignty and freedom of the soul that called for the mercy and personal presence of the Creator (Christ). Ma also mentions the historical stages of biblical translation from the Greek to the Vulgate, and to the biblical works of Bede the Venerable (c. 673-735) already taking place in 8th century England. Yet Ma's ultimate target is to convince his hearers of the universal saving value of Scripture:

The Saviour of the world hasn't come to save one particular nation or one particular race. Therefore, the concerns of Sacred Scripture are related to all mankind throughout the world. But it also relates especially to the Chinese people and to the Chinese nation. Why is that so? That's because Sacred Scripture is the root and basis of all laws. (Li, 2014)

Then Ma goes on to say that traditional Chinese thinking is bereft of the spirit of the law. Rather, China has been mostly suffering from the caprice of its ruling class. Thus, the human conscience longs for "a true law":

If we wish to obtain a true law according to conscience, a law that can safeguard people's lives and property, and a law which both soldiers and plebs can carry out in unison from top to bottom, then we must have Sacred Scripture to guide and foster the God-given consciences of the masses. Otherwise no way it will happen. (Li, 2014)

Classical Confucian ethics teaches about the dos and don'ts of subordinate human relationships. But Ma contends that it is the Christian Scripture that puts flesh on our human relational framework by making us "true brethren" bound by "true love", born and raised by the Creator-Lord.

Apart from the frequent use of patristic sources in his Scripture commentaries and apologetical writings, Ma Xiangbo has a special regard for the circle of early Jesuit missionaries and Chinese Catholic convert scholars (the *literati*) of 16th to 17th century China. He considers their writings a pristine example of inculturised presentation of the messages of the Revealed Religion. These works contain the historical samples of Chinese scriptural and theological translations. Ma diligently compared their manuscripts and republished them with prefaces that reflect much of his personal insights into how to bridge the gap between timeless Christian truths and modern religious exigencies through an applied intellectual effort of re-inculturation.

6.4. Ma entrepreneuring for the body and soul of China

In Ma Xiangbo's mid-life career as a political and diplomatic advisor, his view of the "self-strengthening" of China tends more towards a bolstering of the material and physical prowess of the country. Hence his work for the modernisation of the armoury, the commercial shipping bureau, the banking projects for railways, telephone lines, and many different kinds of entrepreneurial initiatives. Then he moved on to focusing on training young intellectuals to be translators and to be educated in the best traditions of both the east and the west. And when the opportunity came, he engaged himself in political reforms along the line of constitutional and confederate republicanism. Yet not a single of these endeavours seems to be satisfactory enough for the China that is crumbling from within and without. Ultimately Ma recovers that spiritual ethos of Catholicism underlying all his intellectual and ethical campaigns, and he gives himself totally over to the work of Catholic Action to promote an awakening of the national *conscience* to the *light of Revelation*. Ma finally sees that the best hope for a China that is beleaguered by weak morals and foreign military aggression is a mass conversion of hearts to the Catholic religion, so that the spirit of true charity and Christian sacrifice may unite and fire up the Chinese to stand up for its own country both morally and militaristically.

Ma Xiangbo's public identity was multifaceted. As an educator, he founded three universities in China and advocated educational reform. Simultaneously, he grappled with questions of morality, ethics, and social justice. His engagement with Western philosophy and theology shaped his public persona, making him a scholar committed to dialogue and transformation through media literacy. Ma Xiangbo's life also embodied the axis of value response. His personal story intersected with China's historical context, and he navigated the tensions between tradition and progress. Literacy, for him, was not limited to language proficiency; it encompassed moral literacy – the ability to discern right from wrong, justice from injustice, on both the personal and national scale.

7. Dialogue and Conclusion

7.1. Literacy does not replace morality

Here we can bring Ma Xiangbo into dialogue with Newman on the purpose and impact of educational literacy in the wider cultural, societal, and religious context. In the *Speeches and Lectures given at Various Schools in Wuxi* (Li, 2014), Ma Xiangbo highlights the universal quality of conscience from an anthropological point of

view. He criticises the Chinese for being backward and short-sighted, for whilst the west has already "thrown out to Utopia" Huxley's and Darwin's theories as being outmoded, the youths of China in Ma's times (1920s) only then get fascinated by them. Similar to Newman's argument in *The Tamworth Reading Room*, Ma Xiangbo does not believe that to change people for the better is as simple as giving them education. Ma says one cannot just round up rascals of the lowest rung of society and then expect to "educate" them out of immorality.

Newman's criticism of the shallowness of philosophical religion is akin to Ma Xiangbo's constructive critique of Confucianism as a medley of personal human ideologies:

Among the lay faithful nowadays there aren't people who love to study. Such is the second nature of the Chinese people, that they imitate what their superiors do [referring to the not so learned priests and missionaries]. What a pity! How sad! Confucius the Chinese doesn't talk about life after death, that's why everybody is so complacent and useless with whatever situation, whether in prosperity or in adversity (1919). (Li, 2014)

As a point of comparison on personal story telling, both Newman and Ma Xiangbo also wrote works of fiction. Newman wrote two novels, *Callista* (1855) and *Loss and Gain* (1848). *Callista* was about this Christian girl who was martyred under Roman imperial persecution, while *Loss and Gain* was actually the very first work Newman published after converting to Roman Catholicism. It was appropriately a story about a convert set in Victorian Oxford. Ma Xiangbo, on the other hand, created a hyperbolic work called *A Dialogue between a "Big Hairy" and a "Small Hairy" on the Draft of the Constitution*, written in 1916. The background to this work was the attempt by President Yuan Shikai to try to make Confucianism the state religion of the new Chinese state, something which Ma Xiangbo vehemently opposed. It is not clear why both Newman and Ma have individually chosen to make public their ideas in the form of fictional conversations. It could only be said that Newman and Ma are not foreign to the tradition of literary productions, especially the artforms of poetry, plays, and fiction. These are simply the vehicles of expressions of ideas common to both the eastern and western tradition across the ages. But it would not be too farfetched to surmise that, apart from a personal predilection for the literary genre, the intimate familiarity that Newman and Ma have towards the dialogues, parables, and accounts in the Bible and in other Christian hagiographical literature, might have influenced the choice of style in their writings.

While on points on the Church's role in the public arena of media and literacy, literary or scientific, both Newman and Ma Xiangbo share similar insights. In the secular sphere, the Church exercises her authority not

in an autocratic mode. The Church engages in dialogue with the cultures of the world, then it authoritatively assimilates or corrects their components depending on the exigencies of faith and salvation. Newman writes:

She fears no knowledge, but she purifies all; she represses no element of our nature, but cultivates the whole. Science is grave, methodical, logical; with Science then she argues, and opposes reason to reason...any how, her principle is one and the same throughout: not to prohibit truth of any kind, but to see that no doctrines pass under the name of Truth but those which claim it rightfully. (Newman, 1852)

As a meaningful parallel to Newman's position above, Ma Xiangbo is also keenly aware of the Church's discerning power between truth and falsehood when he writes:

Adore the Truth – there is a difference between True vs. False, and Evil vs. Good, for Falsehood must always counterfeit Truth in some shape or form. It is more difficult to distinguish and identify a false church and false teachings, than to spot out an evil religion and evil teachings. (Li, 2014)

While no evidence suggests that John Henry Newman and Ma Xiangbo were acquainted, this article explores

their shared intellectual alignment. By examining their writings and projects in parallel, the research highlights their contributions to common areas of concern, contextualized within their life journeys. These journeys unfolded amidst the contrasting media and information landscapes of 19th-century England and early 20th-century China, offering insights into their engagement with traditional faith, interculturality, and social progress.

Both Newman and Ma Xiangbo recognized the power of personal narratives. Our stories shape our values, inform our choices, and influence our impact on society. As educators, leaders, or individuals, we must honor our personal narratives while engaging with broader issues. They exhausted all the possible means available: books, letters, essays, tracts, novels, journals, newspapers, sermons, lectures, pamphlets, and for Ma radio broadcast especially. The media formats are contingent of course, it is the contents that matter after all. For Newman and Ma, literacy involves moral formation as ethical discernment of and personal response to the intrinsic value of human dignity. Our public identities emerge from personal convictions, therefore as we engage in public discourse, we carry a responsibility – to uphold truth, promote justice, and contribute to the common good.

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Bio

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Digital Counter-narratives for Inclusive Spaces

doi [10.34623/2184-8661.2025.tell_me.383](https://doi.org/10.34623/2184-8661.2025.tell_me.383)

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Abstract

Many cities still reflect patriarchal logics that perpetuate gender inequalities in everyday socio-spatial appropriation and practices. These practices do not align with what is necessary to achieve the United Nations Agenda's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), pointing to the need to identify and address the conditions that limit inclusive urban experiences. This study explores the role of digital counter-narratives in identifying and challenging gendered power dynamics within urban spaces. The main objective is to investigate how digital activism and feminist counter-narratives challenge patriarchal spatial appropriations influenced by misogynistic norms, ultimately promoting more inclusive and equitable spaces. The theoretical discussion explores how digital counter-narratives challenge the exclusionary dynamics of urban spaces, crossing urban studies, gender studies, and digital activism. The research employs qualitative case study approaches to analyse two feminist activist movements, "Girls at Dhaba's" and "Chalk Back," and


their potential to promote critical analysis of spatial experiences to deconstruct norms that perpetuate the exclusion and harassment of women in public spaces. Both projects operate locally and use images and social networks to document as a form of resistance and resilience. The reflections point to counter-narratives as a way of documenting lived experiences and facilitating new forms of participation and expression of territorial citizenship in dialogue with digital citizenship in demanding an inclusive city. This study offers new perspectives on the contribution of digital counter-narratives to research and the production of situated knowledge for inclusive urban spaces and the need for more studies on feminist research methodologies at the intersection of technology and activism.

Keywords

Digital Narratives • Counter-narratives • Feminism • Gender Equality • Inclusive Urban Spaces

Received 2025-01-23
Accepted 2025-03-19
Published 2025-06-30

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Carvalho, I. C. (2025). Digital Counter-narratives for Inclusive Spaces. *Rotura – Revista de Comunicação, Cultura e Artes*. https://doi.org/10.34623/2184-8661.2025.tell_me.383

1. Introduction

Cities reflect and perpetuate patriarchal logic in their organisation and daily life and continue to exhibit significant gender inequalities. UNWomen¹ revealed in November 2024 that one in three women experiences gender-based violence. For International Women's Day on March 8, 2025², which coincides with the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, UN Women organised its efforts in three key areas: Advance women's and girls' rights (challenging all forms of violence, discrimination, and exploitation); Promote gender equality (Address systemic barriers, dismantle patriarchy, transform entrenched inequities, and elevate the voices of marginalised women and girls) and Foster empowerment (redefine power structures by ensuring inclusive access to education, employment, leadership, and decision-making spaces).

These circumstances affect women's and girls' freedom of movement on a daily basis, as well as their ability to participate in daily and public life, whether in simple moments such as choosing their route to school, work, or even where to go in their free time. Symbolic representations and street signs in urban spaces also reflect gender disparities. Feminist collective GeoChicas has been developing maps from a gender perspective since 2016. Their project entitled "Las calles de las mujeres" aimed to highlight the historical gap in the representation of women in the streets of the city. This collective mapped the street names of 12 cities in Latin America and Spain, and their conclusions emphasised this discrepancy. In Barcelona, 16.3%, and in Buenos Aires, only 6.1% of the streets had women's names. Despite a smaller disparity, Havana remains without equity, with only 37.8% of the streets named in honour of women. Another study by Manuel Banza, a data scientist, confirmed this inequality in Lisbon; only 5% of toponyms honour women, a pattern repeated in many global cities.

These disparities in the use of urban spaces by gender, as well as in their representation and visibility, perpetuate institutional narratives and emphasise the need for critical spatial thinking that actively challenges patriarchal structures and advocates for more inclusive and equitable urban environments. This critical thinking offers new possibilities for action in the contemporary context, frequently characterised as the "Digital Age" or "Post-Digital Era", where digital media continuously permeate daily life. This context is even more relevant nowadays since the accelerated development of technolo-

gies and equipment, such as smartphones, has improved the production and dissemination of experiences and information in real-time.

This study explores the role of digital counter-narratives in identifying and challenging gendered power dynamics within urban spaces. The main objective is to explore how digital activism and feminist counter-narratives challenge patriarchal spatial appropriations influenced by misogynistic norms, ultimately promoting more inclusive and equitable spaces. This research aims to contribute to the discussion on feminist placemaking by analysing how digital counter-narratives can facilitate claiming inclusive urban spaces. It addresses the following central research questions:

1. How can digital counter-narratives that advocate for the right to the city challenge patriarchal narratives in urban spaces?
2. What potential do these counter-narratives hold for fostering more inclusive and equitable urban environments?

This analysis will initiate with a reflective overview highlighting the importance of examining urban spaces from a gender perspective. It then explores the pivotal role that digital technologies play in shaping narratives and counter-narratives within feminist activism. This is followed by the analyses of two feminist activism qualitative case study approaches (Mehan, 2024), "Girls at Dhaba's" and "Chalk Back", and their potential to promote critical analysis of spatial experiences to deconstruct norms that perpetuate the exclusion and harassment of women in public spaces. The study includes a relational overview of publicly available online publications, such as social media content and news related to the initiatives developed by these movements. This approach contributes to a broader understanding of digital counter-narratives role in questioning and connecting physical, digital, and social spaces as a strategy for feminist urban activism.

2. Urban Spaces and Gender

Social and cultural interactions influence urban spaces, which reciprocally influence them. The lived experiences and relationships that arise from these processes reinforce the need for inclusive participation in thinking and planning urban spaces. Such participation can take on diverse forms of action, representation, and expression, ensuring that inhabitants are actively involved in the design of their living spaces.

Lefebvre (2000 [1974]) distinguishes between "abstract space" and "absolute space", relating the "abstract" to the conceived space, while the "absolute" to the lived space,

1 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/11/1157046>

2 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/announcement/2024/12/international-womens-day-2025-for-all-women-and-girls-rights-equality-empowerment>

where social dynamics occur, such as interactions, emotions, and sensory experiences. Doreen Massey (1994) and Gillian Rose (1997) linked the social construction of space and place to questions of gender-related power dynamics. They stressed that spatial arrangements and the built environment are not neutral but are deeply intertwined with hierarchies and social inequalities. Gillian Rose's (1993) and Leslie Kern's (2020) studies also ground the notion that urban spaces often reflect patriarchal structures that do not consider women's experiences and needs. Judith Butler (2006) argues that gender is a performative social construction influenced by institutional norms and practices manifested in bodily practices.

This performative social construction of gender is also related to the exercise of everyday citizenship in urban spaces. The existence of differentiated citizenship in urban spaces manifests itself in everyday practice, where access is often conditioned by socioeconomic and cultural diversity (Larreche & Cobo Quintero, 2021).

The problem worsens when the lens of intersectionality is applied, as defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), when different social categories – such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and age – overlap, leading to higher levels of discrimination or disadvantage. These concepts, integrated with Harvey's concept of spatial justice (2009[1973]), reveal spatial inequalities that result from complex situations that combine gender, social, cultural, and economic factors that influence and limit women's access to participate in public life. The exercise of intersectional feminist critical spatial thinking, when combined with the concept of right to the city, enables the analysis of issues of power, exclusion, and social justice in urban spaces, highlighting how these spaces influence and limit women's access, safety, and well-being (Low, 2022).

Michel de Certeau (2011) states that space is a practised place. However, public spaces are still more accessible to men than to women. Fear of crime and the resulting sense of insecurity are among the main factors limiting and constraining how women and girls move and act in their daily activities, thus affecting their freedom, mobility, and safety (Anushka, 2022). Valera & Casakin (2022) recently analysed three public spaces in Barcelona and revealed that traditional gender roles are still evident in public spaces. In this study, they identified the perpetuation of patterns of use that reflect traditional gender roles, where women occupy areas associated with care, and men dominate leisure and sports spaces. This informal segregation of public spaces perpetuates patriarchal roles and limits the inclusiveness and vitality of these places. Judith Butler (2011) defends the right to appear in relation to the ability of a body to exist in a public space without facing violence. This principle is fundamental to everyday practices that show

disagreement with the traditional dichotomy between public and private and encourage critical reflection on socio-cultural constructions that define and condition experiences in urban spaces. A critical feminist approach to spatial practices enables an understanding of social movements that form and resist exclusionary practices that shape urban spaces (Daskalak & Fotaki, 2023), exposing the dynamics of spatial oppression and exclusion. Analysing the urban environment through a gender lens (Haas, 2023) is essential to questioning and challenging established norms that often perpetuate inequalities. Telling the narrative in the first person is an act of resistance and empowerment that allows the oppressed to become subjects of their narrative (hooks, 2019), challenging dominant power structures.

Such practices often manifest as acts of dissent that break the historical dichotomy between public and private spaces enforced by patriarchal social practices and norms. By challenging dominant spatial narratives, these activist practices question the norms that condition the experience of urban spaces and promote new forms of social and civic interactions. Wright & Wright (2017) highlight the difficulty of self-reflexivity for those with oppressive social structures. This concept can be applied to analysing urban spaces where limiting and patriarchal forms and semiotics are often perpetuated intergenerationally. Examining the intersections between gender, space, and power critically from a feminist perspective allows a clearer understanding of the historical marginalisation of women's needs and perspectives in thinking about experienced urban spaces and spatial inequalities. This approach is fundamental for improving civic engagement in urban spaces (Carvalho, 2021) and empowering women to move around, challenge, and reconfigure urban environments through informal and transformative placemaking practices (Mehan, 2024). Recognising the interconnectedness of physical and virtual urban experiences, Brown & Mitchell (2020) highlight how digital platforms can serve as spaces for feminist expression and critique, enabling new forms of engagement and representation and challenging dominant narratives that often marginalise women and other minorities in urban spaces. In this sense, Catalina Ortiz (2022) added the importance of storytelling as a means of challenging epistemic injustice by promoting empathy and understanding complex urban experiences. Brown & Mitchell (2020) underline how digital platforms can serve as spaces for feminist expressions and critiques. These platforms enable new forms of engagement and representation and challenge dominant narratives that often marginalise women and other minorities in urban spaces. Carpenter and Horvath (2022) also noted that by using participatory visual methodologies, researchers can integrate and engage community members in urban studies and include diverse voices in the process, gua-

ranteing a higher degree of accuracy that the studies reflect real-life experiences. Creating safe spaces in the physical and digital worlds is essential for fostering inclusive participation, enriching democratic processes, and co-creating knowledge.

3. Digital narratives

Women's experiences, memories, and practices in public spaces are essential to understanding the cultural dynamics and socio-political processes (Harcourt, Bert & Dup, 2022) that shape our cities. Digital narratives are personal or collective stories shared through digital platforms, using multimedia elements such as videos, photographs, and text (De Fina & Perrino, 2019)

The counter-narratives presented here highlight women's experiences that challenge dominant cultural and spatial norms rooted in and perpetuated by the misogynistic practices of patriarchal societies. A growing awareness of these historical gender inequalities and exclusion in urban spaces, shaped by social norms, highlights the need to broaden and strengthen these counter-narratives through a feminist perspective.

The concept of public spaces, in its various dimensions – whether physical or digital – has become central to developing counter-narratives. The rise of social media platforms and accessible digital technologies have created new opportunities for feminist expression and mobilisation. The participatory culture present in many of these digital spaces encourages the creation and dissemination of these counter-narratives on platforms such as social networks, blogs, and online campaigns. These efforts aim to deconstruct the patriarchal norms that influence the organisation and use of these spaces.

By using digital platforms, these narratives document, amplify, and challenge the everyday harassment, exclusion, and discrimination that women face in public spaces. This can contribute to urban feminist activism, where women can use digital tools to document their experiences, share stories and mobilise support. By documenting and exposing their experiences, digital counter-narratives act as practices of resistance that deconstruct norms and practices that limit and exclude women from public spaces.

4. Digital counter-narratives as a form of protest – two examples of activist movements

This article addresses the production of digital counter-narratives in the context of feminist activism as a form of protest and expression for socio-spatial action.

Counter-narratives allow documenting lived experiences and creating different ways for people to express themselves and participate in shaping inclusive urban spaces.

The selection of the activist projects presented subsequently encompassed their approach to the intersection between urban space, gender, and social justice, utilising counter-narratives to question and subvert the dominant norms that condition spatial experiences. The selection focused on their relevance as counter-narratives highlighting gender experiences in urban spaces. These studies use visual narratives to expose, challenge, and transform power dynamics in urban environments. They leverage digital platforms to amplify activist actions, creating visibility and impact while fostering online and offline communities. Each selected project shares a common goal: to expose, criticise and transform gender norms in urban spaces by combining local and digital actions.

Another selection criterion was having a presence on Instagram, as this platform enjoys widespread daily usage, a global reach, and strong visual elements that effectively articulate messages and document experiences. A thematic analysis was conducted on social media posts (Mehan, 2024) on the Instagram platform, analyzing specific hashtags pertinent to urban space, public space, gender, and various social issues. The hashtags examined included #feministpublicspace, #safecity, #StopStreetHarassment, #stopCatcalling, #feminism, and #Inclusivitycity. The “Girls at Dhabas” and “Chalk Back” projects were selected. These projects offer different perspectives on accessibility, inclusion, and representation by questioning and subverting dominant spatial norms:

- “Girls At Dhabas” (2015–present) developed by a feminist collective document and celebrates the presence of women in traditionally male-dominated spaces in Pakistan and South Asia (<https://girlsatdhabas.tumblr.com/>);
- “Chalk Back” – An activist initiative that combines sidewalk chalk art and social media to document cases of street harassment in public spaces through messages written with chalk in the places where they occurred. This project demonstrates how activism and digital narratives can intersect to resist gender-based violence and advocate for spatial justice (<https://www.chalkback.org/>).

4.1. “Girls At Dhabas” – Representativeness, social and spatial equity

In 2015, Sadia Khatri photographed herself in a “dhaba” – the name for traditionally male-dominated roadside restaurants, teahouses, and coffees – and posted the image online.

“Dhabas” were attended by men and often perceived as inappropriate or even unsafe for women. This male exclusivity reflects patriarchal norms that limit women’s presence in urban spaces, as these venues are viewed as challenging the idea of “respectability” associated with women.

The attention received from this publication made Sadia foresee an impact and expansion of the discussion of the challenge and questioning of the traditional role of women in public spaces. Subsequently, Sadia Khatri co-founded the feminist collective “Girls at Dhabas” (<https://girlsatdhabas.wordpress.com/>), which had as its main objective to document and celebrate the presence of women in traditionally male-dominated spaces in Pakistan and South Asia.

The movement emphasises the concept of “loitering”, arguing that women have the right to occupy urban spaces without any specific reason. The “#GirlsAtDhabas” movement recognises that the mere presence of women in specific spaces can be seen as transgressive, challenging societal expectations which often confine women to the domestic sphere or restrict their public presence to certain activities, such as commuting, work, or shopping. By encouraging women to “loitering” – to occupy public spaces for no apparent purpose – the project directly confronts the notion that women’s movements and behaviour in public must have a purpose.

The activist actions began on Instagram with the hashtag “#GirlsAtDhabas”, where several images of women were shared located in various “dhabas” (Figure 1), considered male territories, as a form of claiming the right to the city.

In August 2015, the collective “Girls at Dhabas” created the Instagram account (<https://www.instagram.com/girlsatdhabas/>), and by March 2025, it had 760 publications and 8565 followers. The content posted here, mostly accompanied by images and comments, shares the experience in the first person, allowing us to visualize and humanize the problems of gender spatial exclusion. The hashtag #GirlsAtDhabas, associated with others such as #FeministMapathon, #WhyLoiter, #submission, #feminist, #reclaim, #publicspaces, #BlankNoise, has emerged as a link to the digital manifestation of territorial claims and to gathered new participants.

The symbolic act of a woman taking and sharing an image of herself in a urban space, where social norms have traditionally restricted her presence or where she may fear societal judgment, illustrates her position and claim of her right to participate in social-spatial urban practices. Every shared image of a woman in a “dhaba,” accompanied by her notes regarding her experience, represents a form of resistance against the prevailing societal norms and expectations. This interplay of image and personal narrative challenges the restrictive frame-

works that seek to define women’s roles within public as well as private places. A representative example can be found in the post dated January 27, 2017 (<https://www.instagram.com/p/BPw-S-gIaO/>), with the following caption:

“Somedays the prospect of spending another hour sitting inside staring at a laptop is enough to make me cry and today was one of those days. So I decided to step out and search for a cup of chai. Today as I walk out and am greeted by the usual – stares, some smirking and jeering – I wonder if my lipstick is too dark or my jeans are too skinny. [...] As I approach a dhaba, I am made painfully aware that I am the only woman here looking for a cup of chai. [...] Loitering alone (sitting around for no good reason) in a commercial area definitely means I am making a spectacle of myself and this is a thought that makes me self conscious. But why should it? I remind myself that I also deserve to be here. In a small way, this is also an effort to be a part of the ordinary scene of the city.”

Most of the comments on the Instagram account send congratulations and reinforce the relevance and the necessity of the “Girls at Dhabas” movement. However, some are marked by misogynistic and hate speech, which replicate the harassment experienced on a physical level. The collective received several hostile comments that undermined their efforts, rooted in arguments of practices and social norms perpetuated by misogynistic and religious beliefs that restrict women’s daily actions. These comments are mostly from men and from profiles that do not disclose the user’s identity or gender. They express fear and concern about a threat to “traditional values” to the existing patriarchal structure of society. These comments often receive responses from the collective or other participants, highlighting the inconsistency in understanding the concept of feminism and its objectives. For example, this comment (<https://www.instagram.com/p/BQDWNolaTr/>), published on February 3, 2017, as a reply:

“[...] you have an apparent problem with feminism, going by what you’ve said as well, treating it as an insult. Why? The feminists I know – in Pakistan and overseas – work to bring about gender equality, fix unfair legislation and ensure fairness and equality. Does drinking chai at a dhaba solve the world’s problems? No. It starts a conversation and lets women and others in solidarity know that they don’t have to worry about harassment (Just because you’re a man doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist). That this small act angers you so much indicates just what @girlsatdhabas have to deal with.”

However, gender biases do not come exclusively from men; some women also express a lack of understanding of why women wish to occupy places like dhabas.



Figure 1. Screenshot from #girlsatdhabas Instagram (August 8, 2017). Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BXhi-npB-oM>

The actions of this collective also pinpoint the necessity for public policies that protect women's rights and foster a comprehensive dialogue surrounding violence against women within broader contexts. For example, the protest action "Stand against rape" declares that "Women's safety and security is in a state of crisis in Pakistan, and we must come together to highlight the urgency of this issue and to hold our institutions accountable. This protest calls for immediate national action and aims to achieve immediate justice for all victims and their families.

Posting online quickly gained dimension and reach and became a means of collective expression and community building, both physically and digitally.

The collective "Girls at Dhabas" has inspired and evolved into feminist collective action in several cities across Pakistan, promoting debates about women's access to public spaces. The movement went viral in 2015 and gained the support of many inspired South Asian women. This sharing of situated experiences and situated knowledge reflects issues of representation and accessibility in a critical and activist way.

These initiatives challenge spatial hierarchies and break norms that marginalise women by occupying traditionally male-dominated spaces – whether walking, dining in roadside cafes, or public sidewalks. In this way, this feminist activist's actions identify and challenge exclusionary spatial norms, document them, and inspire other women to occupy and transform these spaces in order to achieve social and spatial equity and justice. The project has continued to expand and has organised several online and offline meetings and events, such as street cricket matches and bike rides in different cities.

In 2017, "Girls at Dhabas" members created the podcast "Behanchara Diaries", consisting of five episodes, exploring topics such as feminism, intersectionality, and the politics of public spaces, thus complementing and strengthening the movement's counter-narrative.

4.2. "Chalk Back"

The Chalk Back project started in March 2016 in New York by Sophie Sandberg, then at 19 years old (<https://www.chalkback.org/ourstory>). Sophie Sandberg reproduced harassment messages received in public spaces on the pavements with chalk as a creative and accessible way to confront the normalised culture of street harassment and the lack of safe and accessible spaces for people, especially women, LGBTQIA+, and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour). The choice of the New York City context to give visibility to often ignored narratives was particularly important as it is considered a metropolis represented by its multiculturalism and diversity.

Over time, this movement has grown into a global non-profit organisation. In April 2019, the Instagram account (<https://www.instagram.com/chalkbackorg/>) was created, and by March 2025, it had 732 publications and 8865 followers. The project's expansion to more than 150 cities in 49 countries demonstrates its resonance in diverse cultural contexts such as New York, Paris, London, and São Paulo. Chalk Back has become a decentralised global movement, bringing together stories from various communities and fostering a sense of transnational solidarity. This community shares messages and experiences on social media platforms, using hashtags such as #StopStreetHarassment and #ChalkBack. The shared messages of street harassment – such as shouts, insults, and threats – are written in chalk as close as possible to the local places where the incidents occurred and shared digitally.

Chalk was chosen due to its ephemeral nature, thus referring to the analogy of the ephemeral nature of verbal harassment. At the same time, the act of writing it down gives it temporary permanence and visibility, allowing participants to visibilise the attacks and reclaim secure public spaces without permanent disfigurement or legal repercussions.

Each message transcribed onto the pavements and streets, urban public spaces, is accompanied by an anonymous narrative shared on social media, contextualising the harassment and articulating its impact on the victim. The messages written on the ground replicate the catcalling heard, such as "Hey, beautiful, smile" or "I'll follow you home".

By highlighting the socio-spatial dimensions of gender-based violence, the project visually confronts aggressors and passers-by with the lived realities of many women.

Although a temporary physical marker of these experiences, the chalk medium transforms verbal assaults into tangible reminders. This visual representation, shared digitally as a visual archive of harassment incidents, extends the impact beyond the physical location.

The combination of representation of oral aggression and the socio-spatial context in which it occurs makes girls' experiences visible and shocking. Several stories reveal cases of street harassment directed at very young girls, as illustrated in Figure 2 with the message, "I was 13. A man asked me the time. I turned to answer, and he exposed himself." and in Figure 3 with the message "Nice legs for a schoolgirl. What else is under that dress?"

Using platforms such as Instagram, the project creates a digital space to share experiences, promote a global community of activists and supporters with common goals, and amplify individual stories that feed into a collective counter-narrative of feminist activism.

In 2023, the "Chalk Back" movement reported 3,556 incidents of gender-based street harassment³. An anonymous narrative accompanies each message written on the ground and shared on social media. It contextualises the harassment, highlights its impact on the victim, and reveals the shocking level of aggression of the language used.

By making harassment visible, "Chalk Back" contributes to raising public awareness and discourse about gender-based violence. It is also a form of public education that can influence viewers' behaviour and challenge the social norms that normalise harassment.

Hashtags like #ChalkBack allow us to link the posts of street catcalling as a collective repository of experiences, amplifying marginalized voices and creating a counter-narrative to the dominant culture of silence and victim-blaming. This sharing is accompanied by hastags related to the activist movement, such as #ChalkBack, #StopStreetHarassment, #catcalling, #NoExcuse.

More recently, this feminist activist movement has expanded its efforts beyond chalking on sidewalks to include interviews and reports exploring women's experiences with street catcalling. Women share their experiences with street catcalling, detailing the comments they encounter, their reactions, whether if they respond or not, and what they respond to. These shares also have a large pedagogical component, the creation of a counter-narrative based on thousands of shared experiences, also allowing different approaches and reactions to be shared.

The "Chalk Back" movement demonstrates how local interventions can contribute to global narratives and vice versa by combining tangible, located actions with global digital connectivity. On the Instagram platform, the sha-

3 <https://www.chalkback.org/impact>

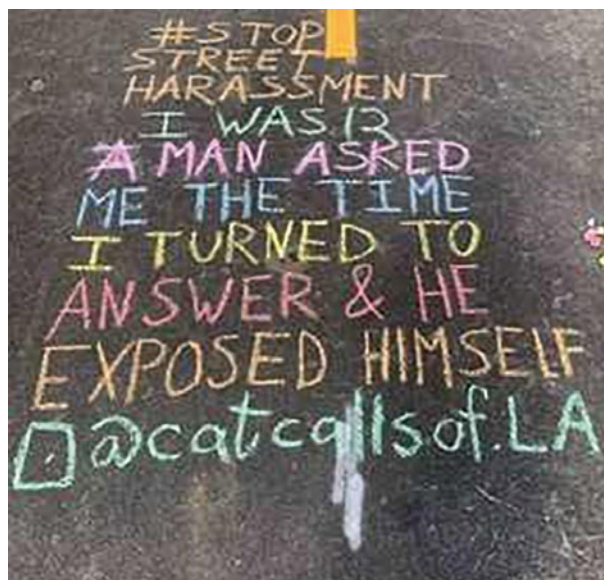


Figure 2. Screenshot from #girlsatdhabas Instagram (April 3, 2023). Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CqJZGNKrNLS/>



Figure 3. Screenshot from #girlsatdhabas Instagram (October 2, 2023). Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/Cx6CICMP59d/?img_index=1

ring of stories has also been increasing with other media, such as videos with testimonies, memes, and images about the catcalling experience.

5. Discussion

Women's experiences, memories and practices in public spaces are essential to understanding cultural dynamics

and socio-political processes (Harcourt, Berg, & Dup, 2022) that shape our cities.

The two activist movements, “Girls at Dhabas” and “Chalk Back,” created counter-narratives that document the lived experiences of women, challenging dominant patriarchal and misogynistic practices and norms that restrict women’s movement and presence in urban spaces. These issues are deeply rooted in and perpetuated by the misogynistic practices of patriarchal societies, which contribute to gender inequalities in urban environments. Both projects critically address widespread issues of harassment and violence while exploring the social constraints that confine women to specific public spaces in their daily lives. By documenting these experiences, they give women the opportunity to share their narratives in a socio-spatial context.

Although the two examples presented come from different geographical and cultural contexts, “Girls at Dhabas” in South Asia and “Chalk Back,” which originated in New York, USA. Both projects use digital narratives to challenge traditional gender norms and spatial segregation while defending women’s right to safety and promoting participation in public life.

The visual language of the projects differs. “Girls at Dhabas” positions the female presence in a predominantly male-dominated territory. The strategic positioning and visibility convey a message of resilience as “I am ‘here’” since their actions challenge the exclusionary norms of the “Dhabas”. The collective challenges female invisibility in public spaces by sharing their photos and localized counter-narratives. This initiative identifies specific urban areas that require attention to ensure women’s safety. Through its counter-narrative, the collective presents a critical and personal experienced viewpoint on the sexist, misogynistic, and exclusionary practices and norms that have persisted over time. In this process, the collective fosters a sense of community. It stimulates dialogues and connections among those who share similar experiences. It reinforces the idea that participants are not isolated in their struggles and can draw strength from their solidarity.

6. Conclusion

This study explored how activist movements create and share counter-narratives that challenge dominant patriarchal norms and practices and contribute to a more inclusive understanding of urban spaces. The analysis focuses on two case studies, “Girls at Dhabas” and “Chalk Back”. It employs digital research methods, including analyses of social media content and the study of protest on the specific themes present in narratives, such as resistance and claim of safe urban space.

The activist movement “Girls at Dhabas” uses the presence of the female body as a strategic medium for political action and social advocacy. Similarly, the “Chalk Back” movement pinpointed disturbing and shocking experiences of gender-based street harassment, taking into account that many testimonies are from girls between the ages of 13 and 18. This activist initiative transcribes expressions of gender-based street harassment in chalk, marking the locations where the harassment occurred and sharing it by posting photos online.

Both projects adopted distinct strategies for resistance, yet they share a common approach centred on sharing personal experiences, documenting those experiences, and increasing visibility. Using different media formats (text, photography, and videos), the posts and interactions shared on social media documented real experiences to identify misogynistic practices. By employing specific hashtags and sharing personal experiences, participants link the personal to the political in the form of resistance. This cycle of action and documentation represents a form of active citizenship in which citizens actively engage with their urban environments.

Participants spotlight hegemonic narratives about space and power, exposing the inequalities and injustices embedded in urban places. This approach is particularly important for feminist activism, as it inspires women to use digital tools to document their experiences, share their stories, build communities, and mobilize support. By questioning, documenting, and actively denouncing exclusionary practices, these activist movements collaboratively promote a vision of inclusive and safe urban environments everyone can inhabit and appreciate safely.

One of the most significant contributions of these digital counter-narratives through a feminist lens is their ability to reshape perceptions of life in urban spaces. This form of active, and personal intervention allows us to make the problem visible. It calls attention to the structural inequalities embedded within these spaces, challenges dominant and hegemonic narratives, and questions the myth of public spaces as neutral and universally accessible. It promotes reflection, thus contributing to producing fundamental socio-spatial knowledge to co-create more inclusive cities.

The counter-narratives explored showed potential for fostering more inclusive and equitable urban environments by incorporating diverse voices and exploring alternative forms of feminist resistance and resilience. Yaka and Çakır Kılınçoğlu (2024) pointed out the necessity for an intersectional feminist perspective to identify and analyze the effects of power dynamics and gender relations on activism, thereby enabling a more accurate characterization of women’s experiences.

More research is needed from diverse backgrounds, contexts, practices, and norms to analyze how these

counter-narratives can reflect women's experiences in an intersectional way. Future research should explore this potential by incorporating a variety of perspectives and proposing alternative forms and methods of resistance, resilience, and civic participation, fostering the co-creation of safe environments for everyone.

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Acknowledgements

Project 2017.04642.CEECIND developed by the author is funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT). The research conducted by the author is funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) with the reference [10.54499/CEECIND/04642/2017/CP1473/CT0001](https://doi.org/10.54499/CEECIND/04642/2017/CP1473/CT0001)

Bio

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Developing Students' Digital Literacy with Digital Storytelling Projects in Design and Media Arts

doi: [10.34623/2184-8661.2025.tell_me.393](https://doi.org/10.34623/2184-8661.2025.tell_me.393)

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Abstract

Digital media literacy is essential in today's world, where media in the form of interfaces, images, words, and sounds is omnipresent. Within this context, educators are tasked with equipping students with the ability to critically analyse and effectively create digital content. This paper explores the role of digital storytelling projects in fostering digital literacy among students, particularly in design and media art disciplines. Grounded in design-based research, the study highlights key pedagogical strategies like project-based learning to support the development of students' skills, like critical thinking, creative communication, collaboration, networking, and technological proficiency.

We propose a digital storytelling project framework for professors and students to convey personal experiences, engage with complex issues, and develop a deeper understanding of the media they consume, share, and

produce. The framework includes guidelines to set the learning environment and to support several phases of student's projects, from initial ideation to online sharing. We present a literature review to scaffold the proposed framework and case studies of different kinds of personal stories created by students using diverse media formats like video, interactive video prototypes, and virtual and augmented reality projects. We highlight several positive outcomes of the framework including resilience and sustainability, as it has been used in several different classes and could be implemented within different modalities.

Keywords

Digital Media Literacy • Digital Storytelling • Project-Based Learning • Design-Based Research • Media Art Education • Audiovisual Production • Pedagogical Framework

Received 2025-01-29

Accepted 2025-03-31

Published 2025-06-30

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Maneira, A., & Mendes, M. (2025). Developing Students' Digital Literacy with Digital Storytelling Projects in Design and Media Arts. *Rotura – Revista de Comunicação, Cultura e Artes*. https://doi.org/10.34623/2184-8661.2025.tell_me.393

1. Introduction

The omnipresence of digital media necessitates the preparation of young people to navigate, interpret, and create in this complex landscape. According to UNESCO's 1982 International Symposium on Media Education, the mission of educators is to prepare students for a world dominated by powerful media. This paper examines the practice of employing digital storytelling projects to develop students' digital media literacy, aligning with pedagogical goals, personalization, emotional engagement, and cognitive development. We focus on higher education students' projects developed from 2011 onward that contributed to support core ideas adopted in more than 10 years of teaching in the fields of audiovisual design and production and media arts. The subjects varied from Audiovisual Production for Marketing students, Multimedia Production for Design students, Multimedia Project for Art and Heritage Sciences students, and Interaction Experience and Virtual and Augmented Realities for Multimedia Art students. The variety of main subjects and classes where these projects were developed supports the idea that the proposed framework and guidelines for professors may be applied in a myriad of classes.

2. Methodology

The methodology followed to develop the study stated in this article starts with a literature review on the topic of digital literacy, digital storytelling, and project-based learning. Departing from previous research projects (Maneira, 2014), we gathered recent studies that discuss the use of digital storytelling in educational contexts, focusing on those developed in tertiary education. We present a framework, and a set of guidelines used for developing briefings, the learning environment and a set of guidelines to support students in their learning process. We then present and analyze a selection of graduate students' audiovisual work considering formal aspects and also methodological approaches relevant to the final outcome. Finally, we discuss the main benefits and constraints resulting from our different approaches in teaching practice and summarize the most relevant aspects that contribute to the definition of a model of teaching that may be considered effective, resilient, and sustainable. The main methodologies used follow a Design-Based Research (DBR) approach in pedagogical contexts due to its iterative, collaborative, and context-sensitive nature (Svihla, 2014).

Design-based research uses iterative processes involving multiple cycles of design, implementation, analysis, and refinement, which allows for continuous improve-

ment of educational interventions. This iterative nature ensures that the interventions are closely aligned with the evolving needs of the educational context and theoretical developments in the field of education and in the field of digital technologies. Assuming this methodological approach, we can accommodate contributions from other researchers, educators, and students. This collaborative approach ensures that the interventions are practical and grounded in real-world educational settings, enhancing their relevance, effectiveness and resilience. Together with practice-based research in digital arts (Candy & Edmonds, 2018; Mendes, 2020), these research methodologies aim to integrate both theory and practice, bridging the gap between theory and practice by using a framework to guide the design of interventions and by refining theories based on practical outcomes. The final objective is the development of robust educational practices that are theoretically sound and practically sustainable.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Digital Media Literacy

The main problem we address in this work is the need to address the lack of social and digital skills for young adults to engage as part of our society. The number of skills each student brings to class may vary; however, in our experience from the first years of college to the last one, there are always a number of skills and attitudes toward digital media and digital production that are lacking in most students, and that can be learned or supported. Digital literacy, like most literacies, assumes that to be literate, not only one must be able to read and interpret but also be able to participate in the creation of new digital media (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins *et al.*, 2009; Manovich, 2002; Murray, 2018).

Regarding the Development of Critical Skills, digital media literacy encompasses the ability to critically analyze interfaces and media content but also be able to master the skills to participate responsibly in the development of these media (Jenkins *et al.*, 2009; MILD, 2018). Many authors support the importance of educational institutions to cultivate an attitude towards online content that emphasizes the responsibility of the media students to frame inappropriate content (Popova, 2012; Weaver & Ford, 2019).

Creative communication skills are essential for navigating the digital landscape of the 21st century and being an active part of it (Cheng & Liu, 2018; Shelby-Caffey *et al.*, 2014). Digital storytelling helps students improve their writing, speaking, and communication skills. It allows them to organize and prototype their ideas, express opin-

ions, and construct narratives creatively and effectively (ISTE, 2016; Ivala *et al.*, 2013; Peña & Cassany, 2024).

These projects often involve collaborative efforts, helping students develop teamwork and networking skills. This is particularly beneficial in media and design industries where collaboration is key (Fisher & Hitchcock, 2022). Participating in social networks is vital for better understanding complex topics and connecting with relevant specialists in advanced fields. Knowing how to find and engage in different communities is fundamental for being up-to-date and participating in the most relevant contexts (Jenkins *et al.*, 2009). Mayer and Fiorella (2022) emphasize the importance of social cues in multimedia learning, highlighting the need for conversational and polite styles to enhance engagement from others. Students gain hands-on experience with various digital tools and software, enhancing their technological proficiency, which is essential for their future careers in media, art, and design (Vaishnavi & Ajit, 2023).

The playful exploration of different tools supports a proactive attitude toward technology. More important than knowing how to use a specific tool to do something it is important that students get more confident in finding and engaging in the exploration of new tools, as there is no single software that will be the best option forever and for all challenges that students will face in the future.

3.2. Digital Storytelling Frameworks

Historically, the definition of digital storytelling started with a series of workshops in the 1990s by Dana Atchley and Joe Lambert, among others, explicitly with the aim of empowering citizens through the development of their personal narratives, narrated by themselves (Hartley & McWilliam, 2009). The main idea – that anyone can learn to create powerful narratives and share them – has been adopted ever since. The workshops they offered proposed a project methodology inviting students to follow some phases that are very similar to a design project.

Multiple examples of educational use of digital storytelling can be given from formal to informal educational contexts (Fisher & Hitchcock, 2022; Lambert & Hessler, 2018; Ungerer, 2019), from traditional settings to online learning. Digital Storytelling may be defined as a set of components that characterize not only the artefacts but also the process of creating. Lambert and Hessler (2018) identify seven components that are generally assumed: *Self-Revelatory* – stories convey new insights, giving a sense of immediacy and discovery; *Personal or First Person Voice* – stories are personal reflections with emotional significance, focusing on lived experiences; *Experiential* – lived experiences are presented as descriptions of moments and scenes; *Photos more than Moving Image* –

still images are preferred, creating a relaxed visual pace; *Soundtrack* – music or ambient sound adds meaning and impact; *Restrained Length and Design* – stories are brief (under 5 minutes) with minimal editing (emphasis is placed on basic techniques such as pans, zooms, and dissolves, with occasional use of compositing or special effects); *Intention* – self-expression and authorial control are prioritized over publication or audience concerns, emphasizing ownership and ethical considerations.

The interest of professors is resulting in the inclusion and research of digital storytelling projects' impact in the most varied learning contexts. Many authors support the use of digital narratives in their classes and present evidence of its contribution to developing already-mentioned digital skills like critical thinking, researching, teamwork and networking (Fisher & Hitchcock, 2022; Peña & Cassany, 2024; Vaishnavi & Ajit, 2023). The results we describe here also seem to validate that the characteristics of digital narrative projects positively contribute to diverse educational contexts.

The use of projects as part of the learning strategies dates back to the beginning of the last century, and since John Dewey in 1938, project development by students in class has been used and studied as a prominent part of experiential learning supported by active and constructivist pedagogies (Handrianto & Rahman, 2018). Project-Based Learning approaches blend with digital storytelling frameworks as projects tend to explore topics dear to their authors, resulting naturally in high emotional involvement. Consequently, this process leads to extra engagement in the pursuit of objectives. Consistently, motivation is considered a key element for learning and retention (Fisher & Hitchcock, 2022; Ivala *et al.*, 2013).

Research by Schrader, Kalyuga, and Plass (2021) highlights the significant role of motivational constructs, such as self-efficacy and positive emotions, in optimizing learning outcomes. Personalized and voice-infused storytelling projects align with these principles by fostering emotional engagement. Digital storytelling actively engages students by allowing them to be creators rather than mere consumers of digital media. This engagement is frequently reported as linked to increased motivation and enthusiasm for learning (Ungerer, 2019; Niemi & Multisilta, 2016).

As for the students' approach, Project-Based Learning (PBL) was used as an instructional method in which students acquire knowledge and skills by working over an extended period to investigate and respond to a real, engaging, and complex question, problem, or challenge (BIE, 2023; Kingston, 2018). PBL is a student-centred learning practice designed to teach concepts using real-world problems and challenges. It is commonly used to develop critical thinking skills and produce engaging classroom models and lesson plans. Teachers often employ PBL to

provide students with in-depth learning experiences, helping them progress. Typically, students are presented with a real-world problem or challenge to solve and are asked to apply what they have learned to create a solution. The teacher acts as a guide and facilitator rather than a traditional lecturer. Projects may be individual or group-based and often involve interdisciplinary approaches, bringing together concepts from different subject areas. In this case, the aim is to motivate students, enabling them to take ownership of their learning, explore topics of interest, and observe the practical application of what they are working on.

3.3. Personalization and Voice

The presence of the protagonist's voice, typically present in digital narrative production (Lambert & Hessler, 2018), has its own place of prominence in current social media. Partially, this derives from the increasing use of personal devices like cell phones (Morris & Turkle, 2018). People carry them all around and use them in close and personal communications. Other persons they hear or see on their phones are often family or close friends and they will also be on their phones. In this way, the proximity to the camera and the use of first-person voice makes these stories adaptable for watching on mobile phones. As Mayer and Fiorella (2022) suggest, students benefit from narratives presented in conversational tones. Digital storytelling leverages personal narratives to encourage students' investment in learning. Sharing personal experiences is a helpful contribution to engagement and for developing a sense of community (Lambert & Hessler, 2018). Therefore, personalization and voice in storytelling are considered strategic for educational contexts.

4. Digital Narratives Project Framework

The proposed framework highlights key aspects that contribute to the effective use of digital storytelling in educational contexts. First, students are encouraged to explore complex and meaningful topics that challenge their critical thinking and creativity. The project includes distinct phases where students present their work progress, allowing for feedback and iterative improvement. Some adjustments can be made to the initial briefing, considering the project duration. In one of the classes where the project spans a full semester, the students had to write a detailed briefing and a response to the briefing explaining what and how they would develop their audiovisual project. The last phase, however, requires

that the final works are presented and discussed to foster reflection and shared learning among peers.

The final works should be published and accessible to the class community or open to the public to broaden their impact. Minimum technical requirements should be set, and students should be encouraged to utilize the tools and equipment they have more accessible to them; however, institutions should also provide access to essential equipment and software that students might otherwise lack, setting a baseline of minimum technical requirements to support the successful completion of their projects. Furthermore, an important part of the framework is that students are usually invited to collaborate with each other, share ideas, and build upon each other's contributions.

4.1. Challenges

Digital narratives enable students to create and share meaning on complex issues. As Joe Lambert and Brooke Hessler (2018) put it, a story can have many functions and can be a way of learning and exercising our memory, a way to create connections in a changing world, a form of reflection space, a way of creating agency, and a way of making sense of our lives and our identity (Lambert & Hessler, 2018). The story as an artifact can have all these functions and the process of creating it in class can be considered as the main tool to explore and overcome all the difficulties within a safe environment.

As students gradually understand these functions and the potential of stories and storytelling in their lives, they gain meta-skills that can be considered the basis for sustainable lifelong learning cycles. For them to develop a compelling story, they really have to embrace the topic. Students are frequently encouraged to address a societal problem and how it relates to themselves, exploring how it can be charged with emotional drive. When looking for images and other resources, students are going through the initial steps of discovery. When scripting, they need to hear it, and they should set the right tone and think about the music and the soundscape that will work better. Part of the challenge for students is to know what they want to say, in other words, what the communication objectives are. They must idealize the story they want to tell, and they should find the best possible way of telling it. Providing students with a set of components for digital storytelling contributes to guide students in their process. We don't present them as a set of rules but rather introduce them as a reference and depending on the level of proficiency with digital media, we may adjust them.

Taking as reference the components earlier presented from Lambert and Hessler (2018), we may omit the com-

ponent that emphasizes still image or put the tonic in the desired effect, “creating a relaxed visual pace” where still images may or may not have their role. The “restrained length and design” may not have a limit of 5 minutes, and for instance, the “intention” may be reframed as in one specific project developed with students in Marketing graduation, where there was a clear objective to convey a specific message to a specific audience.

Students will often ask for examples and part of the professor's role should be to find diverse examples. These can be either very creative and innovative or very classic. They can be very simple or very complex, showing how they all work to grab and maintain our attention. Examples are generally shared and discussed in class but are also made available to students on online platforms.

A good example reuses the University of Applied Sciences Potsdam Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) “The Future of Storytelling” (2013), which has been shared in the class blog of one of the courses. Students should understand that they don't need to “reinvent the wheel” and that there are several ways to tell a story that can be used or adapted for their specific purpose.

The last challenge for students arises after assembling their stories: they need to share them. In the educational environment, students may have a step-by-step approach to making their stories public by sharing early versions with colleagues and in class. Also, part of the challenge will be to be available to receive feedback and to discuss and reflect on possible improvements to the project. As many authors support (Eissa, 2019; Lambert, 2010; Doorley *et al.*, 2018), this approach can be seen mainly as a communication design approach, and students should be given opportunities to improve their final projects.

4.2. The Phases

The digital narratives project framework is structured around a series of phases designed to guide students in creating meaningful digital storytelling projects. These are informed by combining established methodologies such as Design Thinking (Doorley *et al.*, 2018) and the Double Diamond (Eissa, 2019). Such methodologies emphasize iterative processes, user-centered design (Hanington & Martin, 2012; Rogers *et al.*, 2023), and problem-solving. While there may be variations depending on the specific approach adopted in each course, a shared core structure ensures consistency across projects. Below is a generic description of the main phases, including their objectives, methodologies, and outputs.

The first phase focuses on research and the establishment of objectives. Activities in this phase include group formation (when applicable); domain characterization by understanding the project's thematic focus; tech-

nological platform analysis, identifying the tools and platforms to be used; stakeholder and target audience analysis, defining partners and end users; objective definition by outlining the goals of the project; a justified needs assessment plan that includes a description of information-gathering activities, critical analysis of findings, development of use scenarios, user tasks, and user models; and conclusions and project requirements.

Conceptual Design or ideation is the second phase, which involves creating a conceptual framework for the project. Key activities include storyboard development to visualize the narrative flow; mind maps and concept description or scripting, summarizing the main concept, metaphors, and narrative structure. After pre-production, the third phase is the production part, where students create a video prototype that demonstrates one or more usage scenarios for their proposed project. This step focuses on translating the conceptual design into tangible representations.

Evaluation, in the fourth phase, is critical for refining the project. Students are required to develop a justified evaluation plan, conduct evaluation activities to gather feedback, summarize and critically analyze the results, and conclude with a description of future work and possible project improvements. Students are also encouraged to collaborate throughout the project, supporting one another in various tasks and leveraging multiple tools.

To better align with professional practices in digital storytelling, the framework also integrates a structured production workflow that includes: Pre-production (research and ideation, such as creating mind maps, scripting and storyboarding, production mapping and task planning, information design, including tools and support systems); Production (prototyping and iterative development); Post-production (final editing and integration of all project components).

5. Case Studies – Personal Stories Projects

In the chapter *Stories of Our Lives*, Lambert and Hessler (2018) present different kinds of personal stories that we can tell: “The Story About Someone Important” (including Character and Memorial stories), “The Story About an Event in My Life” (with Adventure and Accomplishment stories), “The Story About a Place in My Life”, “The Story About What I Do”, and “Other Personal Stories (such as Recovery, Love, Discovery, Dream, and Coming of Age stories). We applied Lambert and Hessler's taxonomy to organize the case studies we present as a selection of our students' projects. To protect personal data, student names are not disclosed in this document. However, the authors' names are credited through the respective sources cited in the figure captions.

5.1. Stories About Someone Important

The story *Inexorável* was developed by a student in her fourth and last year of a Communication and Multimedia graduation. The student aimed to portray the main character, an old, dying man, and his relationship with his granddaughter. The story develops as the main character realizes he has a terminal disease, and his granddaughter shows up soon after. The heavy topic becomes lighter by exaggerating the character traits. The old man is portrayed as unbearable and anti-social, while the granddaughter is a careless teenager who interacts more for fun than out of great concern about the old man. The project's initial idea was to make a miniseries. However, for the challenge proposed it had to be shortened to be delivered within the semester. The final script included a diagram (Figure 1) with 22 scenes and 6 different endings for the experience. The student wanted to allow the public an interactive experience so that they could better understand the kind of options the old man had to face. The student had never done an interactive video, and she had only recently started mapping interactivity for a web project. However, she was able to create a fully interactive story with a beginning, middle, and end with up to 20 short videos. The character's options were funny, and most students in class wanted to go through the experience again and again following different options to see the diverse outcomes. The outcomes could be very different as the old man could die sooner than expected or accomplish all his last final wishes. The student was creative and explored her storytelling skills, making the options relevant and funny. She also overcame her fears by using a new application to develop the interactive part of her project, exploring more than one software. She became proficient in all aspects of production, from directing the main character to planning the interior and exterior settings.

In another course, and inspired by the project by the project briefing focus on human-robot interaction – with additional considerations of intergenerational dynamics – the *Anjicare* project aimed to improve the quality of life for both residents and staff in nursing homes. The challenge posed to the students was to reflect on

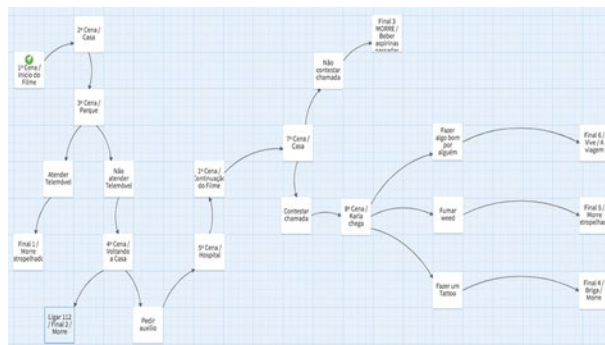


Figure 1. Scripting map of the project *Inexorável*, 2020



Figure 2. Starting shot with the title of the video and a screen with options where the old man can choose to make one of his dying wishes

affective interaction with robots, questioning what types of interactions they wished to promote and what emotional connections could potentially be fostered. As an outcome of this challenge, the students created a video prototype that illustrated the loneliness and boredom experienced by many elderly individuals in care homes and how the introduction of the *AnjiCare* robot could help mitigate these issues.

The main character of the story *Anjicare* video prototype, was inspired by memories of one of the students when visiting her grandfather at the nursing home. The story explored the potential of robots in assistive care in the Interaction Experience class. The group project that adopted the story of one of its members was then highly motivated to create an expressive character capable of shifting its facial expressions from mistrust to tenderness, symbolizing the development of emotional bonds.



Figure 3. *Anjicare* project, 2024. Source: <https://ei202425.wordpress.com/2024/12/11/anjicare-artigo-iii/>

Throughout the design process, the team encountered several challenges, including how to convey emotional nuance through the robot's expressions and how to represent the evolving relationship between the robot and its human companions. These challenges were addressed through iterative prototyping, storytelling techniques, and user feedback, ensuring that the final design effectively communicated warmth and emotional connection.



Figure 4. *Breez-e* project, 2024. Source: <https://ei202425.wordpress.com/2024/12/19/fase-final-breez-e/>

5.2. Stories About Someone Important

Through the *Breez-e* project video prototyping activity in the Interaction Experience class, students were asked to share an emotionally driven narrative involving interaction with robots. This group project evoked a sense of home and well-being by selecting a familiar park, blending personal imagery with the theme of connection to nature. By situating their robot interaction narrative within this meaningful space, the students combined emotional storytelling with the design of affective experiences, reinforcing the potential for robots to contribute to well-being through familiarity and environmental connection. This response to the challenge proposed demonstrated how narrative techniques – particularly those rooted in personal and place-based experiences – can deepen engagement in design projects.

Combining emotional storytelling, spatial awareness, and interactive design principles, the students created a prototype that reflected both individual memories and broader themes of social connection and environmental well-being.

The *Ribeira de Barcarena* was initially intended to be a documentary about Barcarena stream passing near the student's residence. The student was challenged to develop it as an interactive experience. The straightforward solution the student came up with was an interactive map with video segments accessible through geolocated thumbnails. He was further challenged to make it look closer to a story with a beginning, middle, and end. He then created an initial video and prepared a cloud of videos with keyword connections in Korsakow to manage the generative system. The student had to make a great investment to explore the technical aspect of having both the Korsakow system running and having the fixed menu over the map. The final interface had two navigation menus, and users could easily choose between both ways of exploring the stream. Once again, the student's close connection to the subject made it a personal project with great emotional investment from the start. The level of difficulty of the challenges was incremental, and, in this way, several technical and soft skills were supported.



Figure 5. *Ribeira de Barcarena* project, 2011. Main interface. Source: <https://multimedia201112.wordpress.com/2012/01/17/efeitos-do-curso-da-ribeira-de-barcarena/>

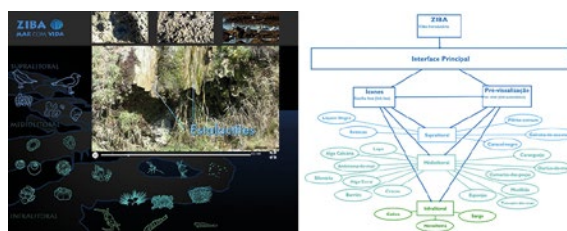


Figure 6. *ZIBA* project, 2012. Main interface and Navigational map. Source: <https://cargocollective.com/mpmultimedia201213/ZIBA>

In *ZIBA*, as in the previous project, the student chose a location near his residence. In this project, the student objective was initially to make a glossary of species from Avencas Beach to bring awareness to the new status as a protected area of biophysical interest. For this project, the student recorded videos for over 22 species from the ecosystem and prepared illustrations for each of them. The initial idea was to make an interactive webpage showing all the different species stratified by zones of the habitat. This student also followed the challenge of making it an interactive video by adding three videos for context to structure the cloud of video segments managed with the Korsakow system according to the areas where the species thrive.

As part of the *Virtual and Augmented Realities* course, students were challenged to engage in a practical exploration within the Reality-Virtuality Continuum. This explo-

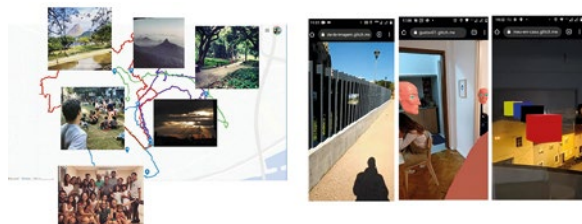


Figure 7. *Memories Gallery* project, 2021. Navigational map with GPS drawings and augmented reality application with 3D content. Source: <https://rva2020.wordpress.com/2021/01/16/museu-das-memorias/>

ration required the development of a project documented through an article or essay, integrating technologies in a way that aligned with their intended master's research themes. To address this challenge, the *Memories Gallery* project aimed to explore the connection between artistic walking practices, design, and public space expression through augmented reality (AR). Inspired by a sense of belonging, the student developed an interactive experience using GPS drawing and location-based AR to link urban spaces in Lisbon, Portugal, with meaningful places in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Integrating 3D elements and refining AR.js for location-based interactions were technical challenges faced throughout the process, as well as managing GPS tracking.

The project effectively transformed public space into a virtual storytelling platform and merged personal memory with urban narratives. The process not only enhanced the student's technical and digital storytelling skills but also deepened his emotional connection to his hometown.

5.3. Stories About an Event in My Life

The interactive adventure story *Can You Be Fast Enough?* was developed in the last year of a Communication and Multimedia graduation. The student created an interactive video as a game where the protagonist is trying to save his life as his stock of vital medicine just ran out. He has to choose to drive to the next pharmacy by car or by motorcycle. He dresses up accordingly and then has to choose between legal and illegal driving options to get on time to take his needed medicine. The student's objective was to make the audience feel the stress of being late for something. The interactivity was created with direct links between video segments using Klynt. The randomness of what would happen increased the levels of stress and frustration of users as many legal and illegal options would make the protagonist fail to get on time to the pharmacy. The project took some weeks to film as the student could not film everything in one

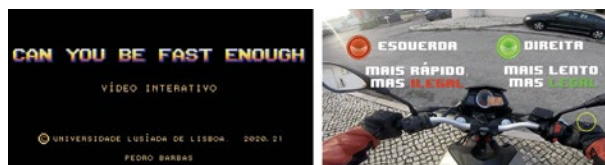


Figure 8. *Can You Be Fast Enough?* Project, by Pedro Barbas, 2020. Starting screen and typical user interface with two options (Left: “faster but illegal”; “Right: slower but legal”)

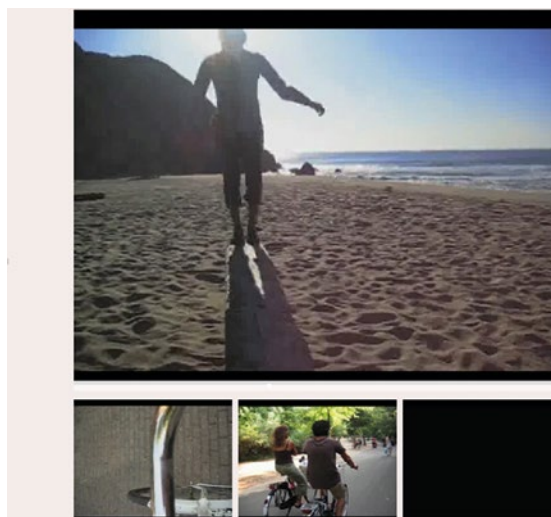


Figure 9. *Media Lab Project*, 2011. Starting screen with the typical 3 options thumbnails summoned in Korsakow system

day and the weather conditions were very different from one day to the next. The student reported that the major difficulty was finishing the project on time.

Another typical event story was developed by a media student in the last year of graduation in a Media Lab class. It had no particular objectives other than showing moments and short glimpses into the author's summer holiday. This project was particularly interesting as the student was able to gather a vast number of archive material coherently under one single narrative. The project had dozens of videos and pictures dating back to the summer holidays with friends. Many of these materials would show the author's point of view or show very closely the author's experience. This project allowed the student to revive memories from friends and her hometown. The shared moments of happiness with friends make it a story about friendship. The author organized the keywording in Korsakow system in a way that allowed the user to see all her videos. The project had a very simple interface that matched the simplicity of the narratives within the project.

The student had the objective of learning a new skill, so she decided to invest her time in non-linear video editing using *Premiere*, an application she had never used before

and wanted to master. She could be found spending extra hours in the class computers editing her work and getting support from colleagues and the Teaching Assistant. By the end of the project, she said: “The main takeaway from this course is that for most projects, you are not able to do by yourself” (Maneira, 2014).

Although mostly interested in creating short segments with a beginning, middle, and end, she started enjoying the map mapping activity to structure ideas and segments together. She also stated that Korsakow system's keywording process was very challenging.

5.4. Stories About What I Do

As part of a video exercise, students were challenged to explore video production techniques hands-on, following a structured methodology that included research, brainstorming, planning, filming, editing, and publishing. The objective was to develop audiovisual narratives that effectively conveyed a chosen theme while experimenting with time as a creative dimension. In accordance with the brief, the aim of the video *Fenómeno* was to capture the essence of BMX, not only showcasing the sport itself but also exploring the broader context surrounding it. The student aimed to highlight the environment, relationships, and lifestyle associated with BMX, emphasizing how these elements contribute to a “sublime” experience both for

practitioners and observers. In this scope, a good story emerges from exploring familiar subjects from a fresh perspective (Lambert & Hessler, 2018). A significant difficulty encountered during the production was the manipulation of both visual and audio elements. The student used video editing tools to cut footage, adjust colour, gamma, and contrast, and eliminate unwanted noise. The post-production process emphasized the analogue qualities of the cassette medium to evoke a sense of nostalgia, a creative decision that involved manipulation of the footage to highlight its vintage texture. The editing tasks allowed the student to expand skills in both technical editing and creative design, achieving a narrative that blended nostalgia with contemporary filmmaking techniques.

Throughout the production of *Fenómeno*, the student developed various skills, including advanced filming techniques, editing, and narrative construction. The process fostered the ability to balance multiple elements, such as technical proficiency and emotional expression, while creating a cohesive story. The student also honed skills in capturing the subtleties of environment and relationships, learning to convey abstract ideas and emotions through visual storytelling.

In the *Heritage Intervention* project, Art and Heritage Sciences students tell the story of the stages of intervention they do on cultural heritage, specifically the restoration work in the corridor of the Fine Arts Faculty where they study, undertaken as part of the course *Technological*

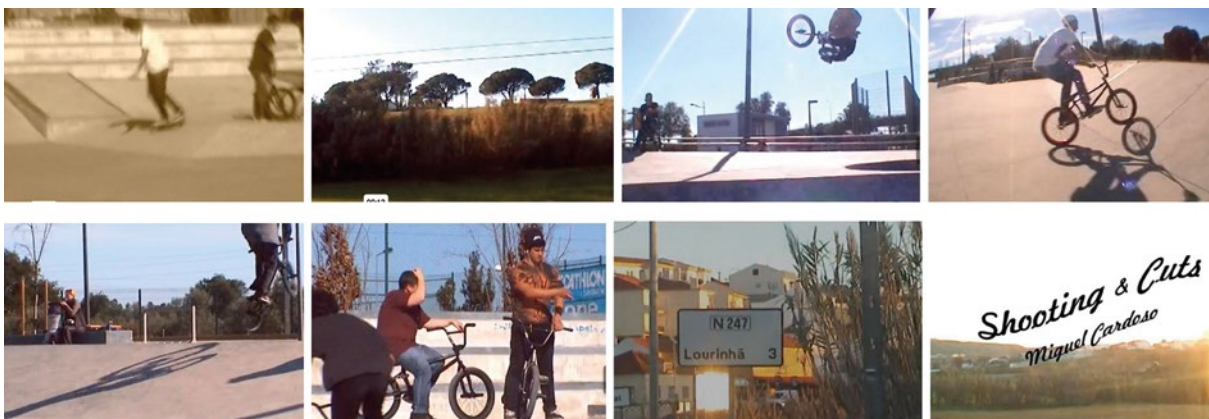


Figure 10. *Fenómeno*, 2013. Source: <https://multimedia2013.wordpress.com/2013/04/22/projeto-video-fenomeno/>

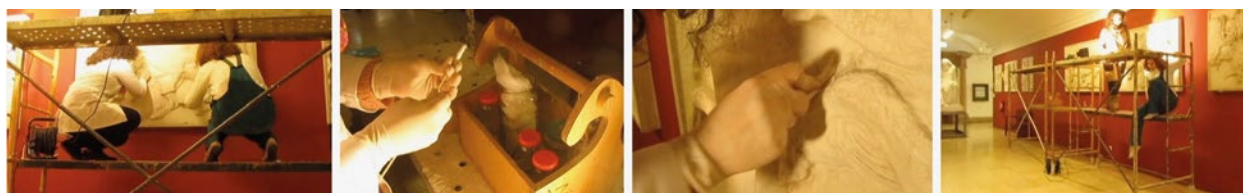


Figure 11. *Intervenção no património* (Heritage intervention), 2015. Source: <https://multimedia2015.wordpress.com/2015/04/14/projecto-video-final-2/>

Studies in Conservation and Restoration IV. The students aimed to create a documentary-style record of their work, which they approached as an artistic performance, highlighting both the technical and creative aspects of heritage preservation. Articulated with the perspective that a life story is shaped by what we do (Lambert & Hessler, 2018), the video reflects the students' subjective artistic expression of their professional training.

The project presented challenges, such as the logistical difficulties of filming in an active restoration environment. They coordinated their efforts to capture the dimensions of the restoration process. The editing process required particular attention, as it involved refining the footage and combining it with a soundtrack that aligned with the narrative and emotional tone of the project. The video successfully presented their restoration work in a way that emphasized both the technical processes and the artistic nature of their practice. The inclusion of feedback from peers underscored the impact of the project: "This exercise was very enjoyable because we filmed something meaningful to us and used it to share our work with our colleagues".

Through this project, the students developed skills such as teamwork, documentary filmmaking, and visual storytelling. By framing their restoration work as an artistic performance, they were able to create a record of their activities that also invited viewers to see the significance of heritage preservation.

5.5. Other Personal Stories

The project *Too Good to Go* was developed by a group of two students for an entire semester. In this class, the challenge for students was to create an ad for a service or product related to the broad topic of "food waste". The students followed all the requests for the initial challenge, which comprised creating a marketing briefing, the plan proposal to reply to the briefing and developing the final video. They gathered information about the topic, identified the most relevant steps for a discovery story, identified an app that gives the title to the project, and described how saving food from going to the garbage benefits both clients and restaurants. They wrote the script, drew a storyboard, prepared a schedule for the production, and finally produced and edited the video, exploring multiple techniques and scenarios. They created and overlaid data from their topic as infographics and illustrated the narrative with images from the web. Students used editing software like *Premiere*, *After Effects*, and *Illustrator*, making the video look and sound informative and compelling. Both students assume characters in the video, and they managed to shoot the scenes inside a coffee shop after closing hours and exterior scenes close by. Part of the

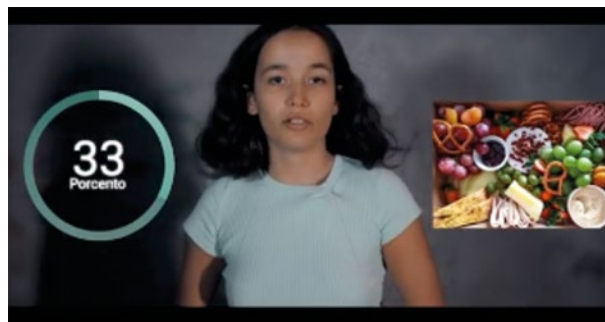


Figure 12. Too Good to Go project, 2020



Figure 13. *Além da Escuridão* (*Beyond Darkness*), 2022. Source: <https://ei202223.wordpress.com/2022/12/14/artigo-iii-alem-da-escuridao/>

project was developed during confinement, which made students become extra creative to work only with their personal recording equipment like their cell phones.

Also, as a discovery story, the common memories of the *Beyond Darkness* project student group when visiting exhibitions as a child – and the adventures felt in the dark environment while holding a lantern – motivated the group of Interaction Experience class students to respond to the challenge of redesigning the experience from the child's perspective. Drawing from their shared childhood memories, they focused on fostering curiosity and wonder, embracing the fertile imagination often associated with childhood exploration. In this context, students were encouraged to freely experiment with different techniques to convey the spirit of discovery. Such work covered both the goal of exploring human-nature interactions through multimedia artistic experiences and the challenge proposed in the exercise briefing: to create an interactive experience that reflects and informs people's relationship with the world through digital media. Inspired by the visit to the "Natural Variations" exhibition at the National Museum of Science and Natural History, the students explored the theme of human-nature interaction by reimagining the sensory and emotional dimensions of exploring natural spaces. Following the outlined methodology, the project progressed through distinct phases: research, conceptualization, prototyping, and evaluation. By integrating narrative techniques and digital media tools, the students developed a prototype that immersed participants in a darkened space, illuminated only by the interactive use of handheld lanterns. This design choice not only recreated a familiar childhood experience but

also engaged participants in a meaningful reflection on human-nature interactions, enhancing their awareness of the natural environment.

6. Discussion

Students develop numerous skills while progressing their digital storytelling projects. In this paper, we chose to focus on an array of skills that relate specifically to digital literacy.

The claim that digital storytelling facilitates the development of essential digital literacy skills is widely supported by teachers and professors since the 1990s (Brigido-Corachán, 2014; Lambert, 2018). The project-based learning approach described here systematizes some settings to create a learning environment that proposes to be particularly supportive of critical thinking, collaboration, and playful exploration of advanced technology.

Our experience highlights the importance of fostering students' desires and personal drives to talk about themselves or elaborate stories of people, places, or other topics that are close to them. We trust that this approach contributes to students' enjoyment and consequently to making extraordinary investments in their projects, thus leading to high levels of engagement with others, high autonomy, more self-confidence, and elevated learning outcomes. These results are in line with the Cognitive-Affective Theory of Learning with Media as it advocates that motivational constructs such as self-efficacy and positive emotions have a positive influence on learning outcomes (Schrader *et al.*, 2021).

The design approach proposed to students includes appealing initial challenges, a diverse range of themes that can relate to personal stories and a well-defined set of phases that support the development and tutoring of consistent projects. Setting a broad theme and adding examples that can relate to social causes encourages students to engage in projects that also have some kind of contribution to social issues. This project-based learning setting allows students to align their projects with the humanity-centered design approach proposed by Donald Norman (2018). We acknowledge this is also a key aspect of the learning environment that makes it adaptable and, therefore, more resilient as it fosters the connections of students' projects to the real world.

The challenge of exploring interactive media fosters cognitive puzzlement and ambiguity as there is an extra challenge for authors and viewers to share the flow of the experience and sense-making. The complexity added to the artefacts supports extra cognitive persistence and effort (Schrader *et al.*, 2021), which is also related to the feeling of confusion that sometimes arises. Emotion-based learning strategies proposed in the presented framework encourage

sustained engagement, as described by Schrader *et al.* (2021). Students' investment in their narratives enhances their learning experience and their peers' (Vaishnavi & Ajit, 2023; Yang & Wu, 2012).

To prototype their narratives, accessible digital tools are key to supporting students' autonomous work. Prioritizing the specific storytelling goals makes the use of these tools a natural consequence and eventually less stressful, leading to the development of skills in video editing, animation, and interactive media within the students' cognitive development range (Robin, 2009). The use of digital tools plays a role in conceptualizing and prototyping storytelling. Within the scope of digital design and user experience, tools for interface mockups, system design, rapid prototyping, and screen-based device specifications are recommended. Additionally, vector design and mockup tools, bitmap or raster image manipulation software, and diagram editing applications contribute to visualizing problems and creating visual aids. Audio and video editing, along with annotation tools, enhance the storytelling process. Furthermore, the incorporation of team collaboration tools and the recommendation of online platforms encourage students' autonomy and agency in selecting the most suitable tools for their project development.

One of the foundational ideas of teaching digital narrative is that the students don't need to be proficient users of technology to start or complete their projects. The investment in technological proficiency is facultative. Regarding digital devices, students are invited to use whatever they have at hand and can even use and reuse archive material. This setting contributes naturally to making production more accessible and sustainable. Students can use photographs instead of videos to create or enhance their work, whether as a more accessible medium or due to limitations in sourcing other materials for their story. However, students should be challenged to idealize their stories first and only after considering the needed technologies and tools. Professors, depending on the class objectives, show examples of digital stories both at low and high technological levels. Professors are expected to provide support for some of the suggested applications. Depending on the resources available and critical discussions in class, students naturally understand that it would be unreasonable to expect the professor to be proficient in all technologies that could be considered. Students are also invited to try software or tools that they have never used before. These tools should have practical use and contribute to doing things they could not do without them or would need additional effort or time investment (Robin, 2009; Maneira, 2014). Overall, digital storytelling projects have been observed to increase student engagement significantly. We find that an increasing number of students are eager to tell their

stories. We find that students with biographical projects or with a strong personal connection often put extra effort into their projects and usually surpass expectations with the results they achieve both on creativity and the amount of work associated. Their stories and the ways they present them are emotionally resonant, and the whole class tends to engage with the projects, investing extra levels of attention and often contributing with positive feedback. Having the students' voice narrating or including their visual representation in their projects usually makes them feel more authentic and contributes to higher engagement from other students. The higher the level of engagement students have, the more effort they will make to try to understand each other or the topics they are showcasing. Ultimately, it makes this approach and the resulting digital stories self-relevant as learning tools, as one student mentioned: "I Always look to others for inspiration [...] After watching some of the other fabulous projects, I couldn't help but get inspired to do more with my own". Sharing experiences and projects among professors and researchers is of great relevance to challenge ourselves in exploring new creative ideas and technologies.

Historically, we have seen how digital storytelling has evolved. We recognize that there should always be a balance between the story and the use of technology. Significantly, students understand the power of depth and emotion for a story to be compelling and memorable. Structure, voice, ideas, self-confidence and creativity must be central (Balaam *et al.*, 2019). Shifting from a human-centred design to a Humanity-centered design approach should also be considered a challenge. We still have no definitive answer to how students can create projects that, while being personal or autobiographical, can still relate to global social concerns. Although undergraduate students in our universities have always lived surrounded by digital media and are frequently on their mobile devices visualizing and sharing all varieties of media, we have observed that the great majority don't create content or share it online. After the experience in our classes, most students have indicated more confidence in having a more active stance as creators online. In the learning cycle, students receive information through concrete experiences, transform it through reflection and thought, and transform it again through their actions to intervene in the world – thus becoming not only receivers but also creators of information (Kolb & Kolb, 2018).

This perspective emphasizes the importance of higher education that incorporates social values and practical experiences to prepare students for a rapidly changing world. In a global vision of future skills and higher edu-

cation within the reflection on shaping the university of the future, Wolfgang Stark (2024) highlights the need for a closer connection between universities and civil society, especially from the perspective of students. He argues that the universities of the future must integrate "social responsibility" and "experiential wisdom" into academic knowledge to enhance their practical and societal relevance. In this regard, universities of the future must be collaborative in terms of civic relevance and excellence, thereby contributing to addressing society's significant future challenges (Stark, 2024).

7. Conclusion

Digital storytelling stands out as an expressive approach to enhancing many soft skills, including digital literacy. By integrating personalization, emotional engagement, and digital technology, educators can foster a deeper connection between students, learning materials, and the real world. The examples presented underscore the potential of this approach to prepare students for a media-rich world where they assume their stand not only as consumers but also as active, creative participants. The implementation of digital storytelling projects within the framework of design and media arts education serves as an approach to developing students' digital literacy while addressing broader educational goals. By integrating social responsibility with storytelling skills into academic practices, design and media arts, students foster meaningful connections between knowledge, societal relevance, and practical applications with critical tools.

This proposed framework's adaptability mirrors the larger mission of higher education to remain flexible, collaborative, and forward-thinking, ensuring that it meets the needs of a demanding society. Digital storytelling, as highlighted throughout this paper, not only supports creativity and personalization but also empowers students to find their voice and agency in digital media production. These projects allow learners to engage with narrative techniques, digital tools, and collaborative processes, enabling them to produce meaningful works that reflect their personal experiences.

In an era where digital media literacy is critical, integrating digital storytelling in design and media arts curricula promotes an effective pedagogical strategy. It prepares students to think critically and create purposefully, enhancing skills that are essential for navigating both their professional careers and their roles as active, socially responsible citizens in a digital age.

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Bio

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BioFlux: Collective Memory as Generative Video Art through Deconstructed Biographical Narratives

doi [10.34623/2184-8661.2025.tell_me.371](https://doi.org/10.34623/2184-8661.2025.tell_me.371)

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Abstract

BioFlux is a video artwork that employs generative techniques to explore and deconstruct documental biographical narratives. The piece is derived from personal interviews, which are woven into a seamless and dynamic stream of human experiences, thereby transporting them into parallel worlds where different outcomes and plot lines may (or may not) come to fruition, based on three pillars: place, person, and memory. By harnessing a generative art approach, BioFlux disassembles individual stories, reconfiguring and intertwining them into a fluid, ever-evolving narrative tapestry. The resulting composition is a living, breathing video flux that transcends traditional storytelling, offering viewers a contemplative and surreal – yet profoundly human – journey through identity’s multifaceted and interconnected nature. BioFlux invites the audience to reflect on the complexity of personal histories and the shared threads that bind us all, revealing the profound interdependencies within our collective narrative.

Received 2025-01-15
Accepted 2025-03-05
Published 2025-06-30

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Alves da Veiga, P. (2025). BioFlux: Collective Memory as Generative Video Art through Deconstructed Biographical Narratives. *Rotura – Revista de Comunicação, Cultura e Artes*. https://doi.org/10.34623/2184-8661.2025.tell_me.371

Keywords

Generative Video Art • Collective Identity • Collective Memory • Digital Narrative

Resumo

BioFlux é uma obra de videoarte que utiliza técnicas generativas para explorar e desconstruir narrativas biográficas documentais. O artefacto deriva de entrevistas pessoais, que foram tecidas num fluxo contínuo e dinâmico de experiências humanas, transportando-as, assim, para mundos paralelos onde diferentes conclusões e enredos podem (ou não) vir a concretizar-se, com base em três pilares: lugar, pessoa e memória. Ao utilizar uma abordagem de arte generativa, BioFlux desconstrói histórias individuais, reconfigurando-as e entrelaçando-as numa tapeçaria narrativa fluida e em constante evolução. A composição resultante é um fluxo de vídeo, vivo e pulsante que transcende a narrativa tradicional,

oferecendo aos espectadores uma viagem contemplativa e surreal – mas profundamente humana – através da natureza multifacetada e interligada da identidade. BioFlux convida o público a refletir sobre a complexidade das histórias pessoais e das linhas partilhadas que nos ligam a todos, revelando as profundas interdependências dentro da nossa narrativa coletiva.

Palavras-chave

Videoarte Generativa • Identidade Coletiva • Memória Coletiva • Narrativa Digital

1. Context

The BioFlux artwork and associated research were developed within the scope of the Conta.ME (Tell.me) project: “Conta.ME – The biographical narrative as an instrument of social and cultural affirmation”. This project – steered by the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Saint Joseph, in Macau – sought to critically examine the role of biographical narratives as a powerful tool for fostering social affirmation and celebrating cultural diversity within the framework of sustainable human development in Macau. The study was conducted with reference to the principles outlined in the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, underscoring the importance of cultural diversity as a vital asset for humanity and a cornerstone of sustainable development, promoting dialogue, mutual understanding, and peaceful coexistence among communities. The project undertook a comprehensive and systematic collection of 23 biographical narratives, serving as both a method of documentation and a medium for amplifying diverse voices. These participants were carefully selected to reflect the region’s unique cultural mosaic, encompassing its varied ethnic, linguistic, and social identities. Each interview was filmed and turned into a television episode, with an average duration of 30 minutes.

The project also considered the critical evaluation of public reception, analysing how these narratives were perceived, interpreted, and valued by diverse audience groups. Special attention was given to the ways in which these stories contributed to shaping collective memory, strengthening community identity, promoting intercultural dialogue, as well as raising awareness about cultural diversity and encouraging sustainable human development practices. From its conception, the project considered within its scientific objectives (SO) “SO7 – Conception and creation of a video art installation”. This artwork was meant to explore transmedia digital narrative techniques and endeavour to develop its own aesthetic through the combination of biographical storytelling and the interactive expressiveness of digital media art, using as its seed the 23 biographical narratives collected during the project. It is, thus, within this SO that the author was invited to develop the aforementioned video-art project. To this effect, the author considered a transdisciplinary approach, on the borders between cultural studies, social sciences, media analysis and generative art and literature.

2. On Identity

Identity is an intricate and multifaceted construct that holds a pivotal role in shaping human experiences. It is

particularly significant during developmental periods and life transitions, as individuals encounter moments of growth, transformation, and self-reflection (Crocetti & Salmela-Aro, 2018). Identity encapsulates both personal dimensions – how people perceive and define themselves – and social dimensions, which pertain to how they are perceived and positioned within broader societal structures. Together, these dimensions form the foundation through which individuals address the fundamental question, “Who are you?” at both personal and collective levels (Vignoles *et al.*, 2017).

Identity may be anchored in time and space, with place playing a crucial role in identity formation. Individuals and social groups construct meanings and identities around places, using them as reference points to position themselves within social and cultural structures (Zhu, 2010). The spatial dimension of identity allows for both cognitive understanding and sensual experience of self. Four processes link selves to space: tropic reading of space, writing of space, placement of self into larger spatial contexts, and anchoring life stories in significant time-space combinations (Yeshurun *et al.*, 2021). Human attachment to place is key in identity formation at local, regional, national, and transnational levels, with landscape features also playing a role. This sense of belonging is fundamental to human existence and political action, though it can lead to both community building and exclusion of perceived outsiders (Rohkrämer & Schulz, 2009).

Recent advancements in psychological and sociological research have prompted a shift in focus from traditional, singular frameworks of identity to more dynamic and pluralistic understandings. This emerging perspective emphasizes the existence of multiple, simultaneous identities that individuals navigate in various contexts. Importantly, it recognizes that membership in a particular category or group is not always straightforward, as identities are often fluid, overlapping, and subject to change. Furthermore, the interaction between different categorical identities can reveal new dimensions of self-concept and belonging (Kang & Bodenhausen, 2015).

This multiplicity of belonging challenges conventional binary modes of thinking, which historically reduced identity to rigid, mutually exclusive categories. Instead, it underscores the potential benefits of adopting flexible identity mindsets that embrace complexity and nuance. Flexible identity mindsets can empower individuals to adapt to diverse social environments, fostering resilience and openness to new perspectives (Gaither, 2020).

While managing multiple identities may present difficulties – such as navigating conflicting roles or expectations – it also offers unique opportunities. For those perceiving others and those being perceived, the coexistence of diverse identities enriches social interactions,

promoting empathy, inclusivity, and a deeper understanding of shared and individual experiences (Kang & Bodenhausen, 2015). This enriched interaction facilitates the breaking down of stereotypes and the building of more interconnected and equitable social networks.

To fully grasp the processes of identity formation, maintenance, and transformation over time, it is essential to integrate insights from a wide range of psychological disciplines. Such an interdisciplinary approach provides a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of identity as a dynamic, evolving construct that is central to the human experience (Vignoles *et al.*, 2017). By exploring the interplay between personal and social dimensions, as well as the intersectionality of multiple identities, researchers can uncover the intricate mechanisms that shape who we are and how we relate to the world around us.

3. The Fluidity of Memory

Research indicates that collective memory is not a static construct but a fluid phenomenon, existing along a continuum between the shared recollections of individuals and broader, transcendent social representations, beyond personal experiences (Franken, 2022). This fluidity reflects the dynamic relations between individual and collective dimensions of memory, where personal narratives intersect and merge with shared societal narratives to form a cohesive yet adaptable sense of collective identity.

One compelling example of this fluidity can be seen in studies of bodies of water, which illustrate how collective memory intertwines with the physical landscape. Over time and across cultures, these waterways become imbued with layered meanings – representing not just natural or engineered systems but also symbols of community heritage, historical events, and cultural identity. As these landscapes evolve, so too do the memories associated with them, revealing a reciprocal relationship where memory both shapes and is shaped by the environmental context (Lavoie & Sleipness, 2018).

The malleable nature of individual memory plays a key role in this process. Individual memories, inherently selective and reconstructive, possess the flexibility to converge into shared recollections through processes such as storytelling, ritual, and collective experience. One of the interviewees of project Conta.ME posits: “I have several memories that I know are mine. There are other memories that I think I later absorbed as mine, but they were someone else’s, who told me about them”. This convergence fosters the formation of collective memory, which serves as a cornerstone for social cohesion, identity, and the maintenance of cultural traditions (Brown *et al.*,

2012). In this way, memory acts as a bridge, connecting individual experiences with the broader social fabric.

Interestingly, the concept of fluidity in collective memory also finds parallels in physical systems. Experiments with granular materials offer an interesting metaphor for understanding this phenomenon. Under specific conditions, such as high densities and low temperatures, these materials exhibit persistent collective rotational modes, signifying emergent patterns of coordinated behaviour within a seemingly disordered system (Plati & Puglisi, 2021). Similarly, collective memory emerges from the interactions of individual memories, creating patterns of shared understanding that persist and adapt despite the inherent variability of individual inputs.

The above points and studies underscore the inherently dynamic and adaptive nature of collective memory. It evolves in response to a wide range of influences, including social interactions, environmental transformations, and shifting cultural contexts. Rather than being a fixed repository of the past, collective memory is a living process, continuously reshaped by the present and open to reinterpretation in the future. This fluid nature of collective memory and its role in shaping social identity and cultural narratives is one of the major inspirations behind BioFlux.

4. Electronic literature

The integration of Dadaist practices in electronic literature represents a fascinating continuation of avant-garde techniques within the realm of digital media (O’Sullivan & O’Sullivan, 2019). This synthesis bridges historical artistic movements and contemporary technological innovation, demonstrating the adaptability of experimental aesthetics in exploring new forms of expression. By incorporating the radical, anti-establishment ethos of Dadaism, electronic literature challenges traditional notions of authorship, linear narrative, and meaning-making, thus opening new avenues for creative and cultural engagement.

This avant-garde approach resonates with broader themes of collective identity and memory, particularly in narrative works that delve into cultural and ethnic experiences. Through sophisticated and often fragmented storytelling methods, authors invite readers to confront complex issues of belonging, heritage, and shared histories. Such works frequently engage with intertextuality, multilingualism, and multimedia elements to construct layered narratives that reflect the diversity and plurality of human experiences (Trichopoulos *et al.*, 2023).

Experimental texts in shareable digital formats empower readers by promoting self-governing, participatory and collective reading practices. Rather

than adhering to traditional, passive modes of consumption, readers are encouraged to actively navigate, interpret, and even co-create meaning. This engaging process fosters a sense of communal, connective identity, as readers become part of a larger dialogue that transcends individual experience. These texts often prioritize fluidity, openness, and multiplicity, reflecting the complexities of modern identity and the interconnected nature of contemporary societies (Spahr, 2001).

Unlike individual memory, collective memory comprises recollections of the past that are determined and produced by groups. Individuals are restricted in their ability to remember in a coherent successive manner beyond the connections and constraints of their group and thus society plays a large role in determining and shaping their memories. (Yasseri *et al.*, 2022, p. 2)

In the realm of electronic generative poetry, Oulipian constraints and Dadaist methods take on new dimensions through their adaptation to digital technologies, and particularly to generative art. Queneau's rats create their labyrinths (Bellos, 2010) through permutational schemes, combinatory patterns, and syntactic templates, combined in algorithms to create works that evolve dynamically within predefined structures (Kuchina, 2018). These techniques, while rooted in the historical practices of the avant-garde, leverage the capabilities of digital environments to generate texts that appear random or chaotic on the surface but are meticulously crafted according to underlying parameters.

This fusion of traditional avant-garde approaches with digital innovation creates a unique aesthetic space that challenges perceptions of authorship, individuality, creativity, and interpretation. Electronic literature becomes a playground for exploring themes such as memory, identity, and collective experience, offering new ways to engage with the past and imagine alternative futures. By merging historical methods with cutting-edge technology, these works not only pay homage to their avant-garde predecessors but also push the boundaries of what literature can achieve in a digital age. Ultimately, this integration underscores the continued relevance of experimental techniques in addressing contemporary social, cultural, and artistic questions.

In digital space, as an extension to the physical, people with common interests share images, experiences, and others join to create communities of collectively remembering. Giaccardi and Simon argue that digital heritage has changed how memories are created, valued and transmitted in a society where people are increasingly unified by these forms of engagements, consequently contributing to bottom-up approaches of heritage making. With digital media, heritage is actively co-created and it is based on everyday practices and experiences. (Kambunga *et al.*, 2020, p. 786)

Through the lens of electronic and generative literature, we see how the avant-garde's legacy endures, adapting to new tools and mediums to remain a powerful force for addressing collective memory and cultural heritage in the digital era.

5. Generative Video Art

The concept of generative art refers to an iterative and algorithmic process through which the final artwork takes shape. At their core, generative algorithms strike a balance between order and disorder, using (computer driven) controlled randomness to introduce variability in timing, scale and scope, and delivering a structured output. In addition, each iteration of the algorithm, can be regarded as a starting point for the subsequent iteration. This process creates an infinite number of unique, potentially non-repeating outcomes within the aesthetic framework defined by the artist-programmer (Dehlinger, 2020).

Regardless of these variations, the term generative consistently implies the presence of an autonomous algorithmic system that governs the production of a specific type of output, regardless of the type of media being transformed: lines, images, sounds or words and sentences. In this context, the artwork exists not only in its code, but also in the process of execution and the resulting output. If the output is an audio-visual stream, then the artwork may be categorised as a generative video artwork.

Generative video art may thus be perceived as both the offspring of abstract generative art with analogue video art, as well as a specialization of generative cinema. Much like video art, generative cinema in digital art became more accessible – and therefore popular – with the democratization of the technologies for digital video recording and editing. The ensuing development of the area, however, was fostered not just by technical aspects, such as the development of software and hardware for manipulating large numbers of equally large multimedia files and complex databases, but also by methodological and conceptual aspects, going beyond the limitations of image and sound synthesis, embracing different poetics, much like video art did in respect to film and cinema. (Veiga, 2023, p. 247)

In generative video art, the image is often deconstructed in its initial stages, before being reconstructed, recomposed, reorganised, and recombined – much as with electronic literature. As a result, the image transforms into a vortex, “from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing” (Pound, 1914). Ezra Pound emphasised vorticism's

focus on the representation of energy, mechanical precision, and concentrated power, positioning it as a legitimate expression of life. Generative video art, as a temporal and dynamic art form, not only encapsulates these vortical principles but also expands upon them by introducing a time-based vortex and mosaic. Each iteration produces a new vortex/mosaic, with continuous and evolving generations of recombinations and transformations:

This perspective is embraced by video art, and most particularly by generative video art, determined by the absence of a formal logical and linear narrative (replaced by sensations and evocations), by recomposing and recombining its vocabulary into simultaneous renderings of different sources [...]. (Veiga, 2023, p. 262)

6. Methodology

Arts-based practices have posed serious challenges to methods conventions, thus unsettling many assumptions about what constitutes research and knowledge. Inkeri Sava and Kari Nuutinen refer to these methods as presenting a “troubling model of qualitative inquiry into self, art, and method.” These disruptions to traditional research practices, much like early responses to the qualitative challenge to positivism, have caused concerns and inspired debates. As our methods history shows, such debates are critical to scientific progress, as they create a space for a professional public renegotiation of disciplinary practices and standards. (Leavy, 2020, p. 11)

Creative processes are seen as sequences of generative moments, pathways, and iterations of creative thought, forming open and interactive systems. These systems integrate diverse and dynamic elements – media, techniques, narratives, values, memories, dialogues, individual and collaborative efforts, geography, temporality, and more – situated within academic, historical, social, cultural, political, and economic contexts.

The BioFlux project, comprising both the artwork (and its development) and all the related research, adopts the framework of a/r/cography (Veiga, 2019), which positions creative research along three interconnected vectors, through writing: art (a), research (r), and communication (c). Central to this approach is artistic experimentation, encompassing its intended and perceived meanings, aesthetics, and the research it implies and generates, which is documented in a digital journal (Veiga, 2021). The outcomes of this process materialise in the public presentation of any of the outcomes, whether it is artwork, the connected research or the communication of both. The term a/r/cography also finds resonance in the

metaphor of the arc (a/r/c), symbolising a creative and exploratory journey. Unlike the directness of a straight line, the arc embraces peripheral exploration, prioritising richer and more rewarding paths over efficiency. However, unlike the meandering of flâneurs, the arc maintains a clear starting point and destination, fostering deliberate and purposeful deviations along the way.

Documenting these iterative processes, which culminate in the creation of artworks, provides a tangible expression of creativity’s defining traits: originality, usefulness, and surprise (Simonton, 2022). The study of creative processes reveals that the system is not a simple sum of its parts but a complex interplay of interdependent actions and reactions. This dynamic resembles a network or rhizome in constant transformation, challenging concepts like origin, conclusion, hierarchy, or linear methods of organisation.

While the a/r/cography method involves seven well-identified stages or phases, these can be revisited, questioned, and reoriented at any point, ensuring flexibility and ongoing evolution. Through iterative cycles of analysis, conceptualisation, and refinement, the creation/research process unfolds, culminating in public presentation(s). Over time, earlier stages may be revisited and reworked, reflecting the dynamic and evolving nature of the creative journey.

6.1. Inspiration

The concept of inspiration is often elusive, and may be described as a spark of insight, creative intuition, or a motivating force that evokes ideas and emotions. Within a/r/cography, inspiration serves as the initial phase, though its placement may seem contradictory in a framework that resists linear progression. Yet, inspiration can equally emerge as the result of iterative processes in later stages, with its components often becoming clear to the artist-researcher only in hindsight.

A substantial portion of the inspiration for this project was drawn directly from Conta.ME digital materials, including transcripts of the 23 interviews and their corresponding filmed and post-produced versions. Additionally, the interviewees contributed numerous photographs that chronicled their personal narratives, often capturing moments from their childhood.

Inspiration also derived from sources that had been previously gathered. From a visual perspective, Vieira da Silva’s geometrically structured compositions – such as the mural at Rato Metro Station in Lisbon, depicted in Figure 1 – proved particularly influential, alongside David Hockney’s iconic photo collages.



Figure 1. Tile mural by Helena Vieira da Silva. Rato metro station, Lisbon

6.2. Trigger

Creative processes in art and research often begin with a trigger – an impetus or motivating factor. This trigger may arise internally (from neuropsychological mechanisms), externally (through stimuli), or from a combination of both. It serves as the link between inspiration and reason, guiding the artist towards creation or the researcher towards inquiry. The trigger's impact depends on the artist's motivations, experiences, and context, marking the moment when latent inspiration transforms into a conscious creative process. While it defines the process's intent, the trigger is sometimes only recognised retrospectively, upon reflecting on the creative journey.

However, in this case, BioFlux was clearly set in motion by the invitation to develop a video artwork within the broader scope of Conta.ME project. Thus, this external event constitutes without a doubt the project's trigger.

6.3. Intention

The process of creating an artwork is guided by the artist's intentions – much like the research project is driven by the researcher's intentions. These, in turn, imply a series of subjective reactions – effort, doubt, satisfaction, rejection – and decisions. Many of these occur outside the artist's full awareness, particularly on the aesthetic level. This often results in a gap between the artist's original intent and the final outcome, a disparity that may remain unnoticed until they revisit all stages of the process, after reaching the (first) intervention stage. For the a/r/cographer, intentions are multi-faceted, serving as a framework for inquiry, experimentation, and interpretation.

The author's intention was to employ generative techniques to explore and deconstruct the original biographical narratives, and then reassemble, reconfigure and intertwine them into a fluid, ever-evolving narrative and visual tapestry, consisting in a continuous flow of

fragments and glimpses into textual and visual reconstructions of memories, seamlessly woven into a dynamic stream of interconnected thoughts, human experiences, and recollections designed to evoke the audience's own memories. This living and evolving video flux transcends traditional linear storytelling by employing dynamic impressionistic reconstruction and combination. It invites the audience on a contemplative and surreal – yet deeply human – journey, exploring the multifaceted and interconnected nature of collective reflections on identity and their intrinsic interdependencies within individual narratives.

6.4. Conceptualisation

Once the project's intention is fully understood, the a/r/cographer is equipped to articulate a concept – a preliminary vision of the direction the intention will drive the research and a conceptual framework for the artwork. To develop this concept, the a/r/cographer synthesises sources of inspiration, seeking creative connections through a process of research, experimentation, and critical assessment. This process involves refining ideas, discarding less viable outcomes, and evaluating the project's feasibility. Ultimately, this leads to an initial written articulation of the concept, formulated as either a research hypothesis or an artistic proposition.

The concept of BioFlux is set in a distant future, where a computer drive is found, with a series of fragmented files containing what will be identified as the collective memories of a particular community in a specific geographic area. Those file formats are no longer used, recognised or acknowledged by current computers, so an automated process of reconstruction takes place, unaware of the origins, content and context of each individual file. As the reconstruction process progresses, the audience catches glimpses of glitched phrases and images, all contributing to the creation of a particular atmosphere: an impressionist portrait of a specific community, place and time.

6.5. Prototyping

Once the initial concept for the artwork is established, the a/r/cographer embarks on a cycle of interrelated processes – design, development, and evaluation – referred to as prototyping. This phase is driven by research, experimentation, and phenomenological interpretation. Through this iterative process, undesirable outcomes are eliminated, while promising elements are refined. The concept is then validated or revised by integrating new insights and conducting direct tests on experimental iterations. During this stage, the primary research focus is twofold: first, to conduct a “state of the art” review, identifying whether similar projects have been undertaken by other artists and verifying the originality of the work; second, to explore alternative approaches, variations, and deviations that can enhance and further develop the concept. This iterative refinement ensures both the concept and its implementation evolve into more nuanced and enriched visions.

In BioFlux, this stage began with the identification of four phrase categories and the extraction of phrases from all 23 interview transcripts.

Several photos were also collected from the project archive, including photos provided by the interviewees, several photos taken by the author in Macau, as well as other public domain historic photos of the territory.

A process of deconstruction ensued, affecting both the text and images, to achieve two effects: (1) that of an impressionist animation, transforming still images into a lively tapestry of visual sensations, as shown on Figure 2, and (2) a stream of short “thought” fragments, like glimpses into a collective memory. These phrases were then combined and randomly streamed during the initial stages of prototyping, and they would fill the screen, cyclically fading away and being replaced by other phrases, as shown in Figure 3.

6.6. Testing

Once the prototype has been refined by its author, the a/r/cographer progresses to a stage where they feel

ready to present their work to a select audience, consisting of trusted friends, family, and close academic or artistic peers. While this phase shares many processes with the prototyping stage, it differs in the project’s level of development and the a/r/cographer’s readiness for external feedback. This feedback helps to enhance and solidify the project while also boosting the a/r/cographer’s confidence in their work. Audience responses are carefully documented and analysed, allowing the incorporation of valuable insights that further refine and strengthen the project.

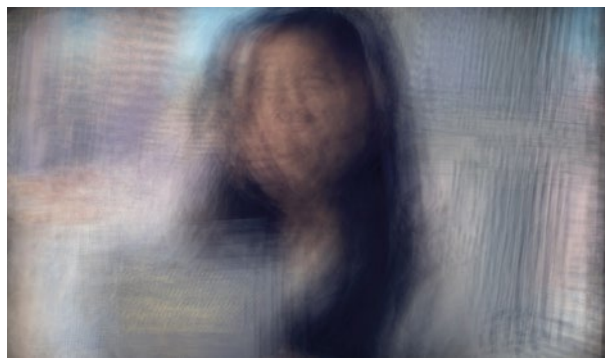


Figure 2. The deconstruction/recombination process used to animate the still images



Figure 3. A screen capture of the prototype, taken at an early stage of development

This was achieved by exhibiting the finished prototype to a reduced number of individuals, including the Conta. ME project leader, several students at the University of Saint Joseph, in Macau, and close friends of the author who live or have lived in Macau. Based upon the (filtered) collected feedback the author then decided to introduce several changes in the original prototype, namely:

- The systematic use of two images as the backdrop, mutually overlapping in dynamic sections of the screen, and the inclusion of a third circular image at the centre of the screen.
- Replacing the succession of text segments that were used to fill the screen with a unique combination of two: one generic segment plus another segment belonging to one of the other three categories (place, personal, memory). This combination remains on screen for a specific amount of time, determined to allow the audience’s own analysis and imagination to develop, but not for too long as to lessen their curiosity on its continuity.
- The inclusion of a generative line animation, encircling the centre image, to convey an artistic sense of “computation at work”, as if a meaning extraction of the text and the centre image is underway, until the whole set fades away.



Figure 4. A sequence of four consecutive screen captures illustrating the animation of both text and images in the finished version



Figure 5. Focus on the generative line art encapsulating the centre image

These changes also impact the conceptualisation and intention stages, as expected and predicted. This new approach is depicted in Figure 4, showing the progression of one “memory” along with the centre image and generative line animations, which are, in turn, highlighted in Figure 5.

While incorporating the original Conta.ME interviewees into the test group would have been valuable, the author lacks direct connections with them and resides on a different continent. As a result, the agile process that typically defines this stage – relying on in-person, rapid cycles/loops of “comment → change → analysis → comment” – was not feasible.

6.7. Intervention

In methodological terms, the intervention stage represents the thesis phase, as it serves to validate the hypothesis – that is, the a/r/cographer’s original intention. By definition, it achieves at least one primary objective of an a/r/cography project, as its culmination involves either a public exhibition, publication, or other forms of communication. However, an a/r/cography project often extends beyond this point, enabling revisitation and iterative development. As with earlier stages, this revisitation may lead to further versions, exhibitions, publications, or communications, incorporating adjustments and modifications that reflect the generative nature of the methodology.

BioFlux was first exhibited on the 14th of June, 2024, during the Tell.Me Symposium – the First International Symposium on Biographical Narratives in Media and Information Literacy Cities, organised by the School of Doctoral Studies and the Faculty of Religious Studies and Philosophy, and hosted by the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at USJ.

The present article is yet another iteration of this stage within the a/r/cography project, taking place several months after the first intervention, and incorporating refinements in several stages that have occurred during this time, as described above.

7. Conclusion

Digital media art projects frequently encompass a wide range of interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and systemic roles. A/r/cography integrates three key roles – the artist, researcher, and communicator – to support the interplay of artistic practice and research. In addition to these primary roles, many others – such as curators, writers, critics, and historians, among many others – contribute to a network of interconnections. This network is dynamic, allowing its hierarchy, structure, and flow to adapt to interdependencies within the system.

In a/r/cography, progression between stages is not strictly linear and can often move bidirectionally, with even the initial point of inspiration emerging from a prior project. As a result, seemingly unrelated projects (with shared authors) can influence one another through their interconnected processes. Within the broader Conta.ME scope, such was also the case, as the 23 episodes /interviews – a separate creative process altogether – not only heavily influenced BioFlux but also provided the basis for its development.

The act of documenting these processes, including both the creation and communication of the artworks, is as crucial as the documentation of the artworks and the research themselves. Contextualising these processes is equally vital, as they are considered integral components of the project.

BioFlux, thus, emerges as an artistic exploration of memory and identity, offering a multifaceted portrayal of the Portuguese community in Macau through the prism of individual and collective recollections. By weaving together excerpts of 23 interviews, each contributing a distinct thread of individual memory and history, BioFlux captures glimpses of these accounts, fragmented yet interconnected. The generative video artwork becomes a dynamic narrative, where the stream of images and text mirrors the fluidity of memory itself – elusive, mutable, and constantly evolving. In its impressionistic approach, BioFlux does not merely preserve collective memory: it breathes life into it, conveying the complexity of identity shaped by time, place, and experience. It invites audiences to reflect on how memories, fashioned by both personal and communal histories, create a shared sense of belonging that transcends generations.

As such, BioFlux stands as both an artistic and scholarly testament to the enduring significance of memory, offering a view of the rich, ever-evolving identity of the Portuguese community in Macau.

The author welcomes the possibility to present BioFlux to the original interviewees of Conta.ME, allowing their feedback to contribute to the development of a further iteration of the artwork. Thus far, no such opportunity has arisen.

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Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the invaluable support of Professor Adérito Fernandes-Marcos and the team members of the project Conta.ME – The Biographical Narrative as an Instrument of Social and Cultural Affirmation for their contributions in conducting the interviews and providing the final digital materials, several of which are integral to BioFlux. Special appreciation is also extended to the University of Saint Joseph for its financial support, which was instrumental in the development of this artwork.

Bio

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Operatividade e Intermitência: Luz e Sombra na obra de José Carlos Neves. Aproximações aos Interface, Processo, Presença

Operativity and Intermittence: Light and Shadow in the Work of José Carlos Neves. Approaches to Interface, Process, Presence

doi [10.34623/2184-8661.2025.tell_me.374](https://doi.org/10.34623/2184-8661.2025.tell_me.374)

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Resumo

Este artigo procura dar conta da presença do interface e do seu uso negativo nas chamadas artes dos media, focando-se, para isso na obra artística de José Carlos Neves como caso paradigmático. Ainda que se perspetive a totalidade a sua produção artística, o artigo centrar-se-á mormente nas obras *4 tempos para: (...)* e *Shadow Machine*. Assim, será nosso objectivo mostrar como enquadrar o percurso e as obras anteriores como processo de isolamento do interface para com o computador, dado que a originalidade da sua obra, no contexto das artes dos media, se centra sempre a desarticulação ou *deconstrução* (Derrida, 1967; 1972; Nuyen, 1989) dos meios em que este assenta, como procuraremos mostrar. Em segundo lugar, procurar-se-á fazer um levantamento do uso da luz e da sombra nas obras supracitadas, tendo por referência o papel que as primeiras desempenharam na história da arte e do pensamento Ocidental enquanto metáforas fortes para determinar as relações de existência e não-existência e as suas zonas cinzentas.

Artigo recebido em 2025-01-16
Artigo aceite em 2025-03-05
Artigo publicado em 2025-06-18

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Carlos Neves, J., & Gomes Pinto, J. (2025). Operatividade e Intermitência: Luz e Sombra na obra de José Carlos Neves. Aproximações aos Interface, Processo, Presença. *Rotura – Revista de Comunicação, Cultura e Artes*. https://doi.org/10.34623/2184-8661.2025.tell_me.374

Se de um ponto de vista estético, a arte interactiva não reúne ainda um consenso universal na sua definição, é porque desde o ponto de vista da sua criação e da sua autoria, ela se apresenta já, como se apontará, como uma experiência pré-programada (Rafaeli, 1988). Mostraremos como a obra de José Carlos Neves¹ se mobiliza como instrumento que possibilita um modo de mostrar a operatividade e a intermitência do processo artístico e da experiência estética.

Palavras-chave

Interface • Intera • *Spectacteur* • Mecanismo • Som • Luz • Sombra • Objeto Estético

1 Por economia textual e literária, evitando repetições que podem distrair o leitor do texto do argumento apresentado a cada passo utilizaremos as siglas JCN.

Abstract

This article seeks to analyse the presence of the interface and its negative use in the so-called *Media Arts*, focusing on the artistic work of José Carlos Neves as a paradigmatic case. Although we are looking at his entire artistic production, the article will focus mainly on the works *4 tempos para: (...)* and *Shadow Machine*. Thus, our aim will be to show how to frame his trajectory and previous works as a process of isolating the interface from the computer, given that the originality of his work, in the context of *Media Arts*, is always centred on the disarticulation or *deconstruction* (Derrida, 1967; 1972; Nuyen, 1989) of the media on which it is based, as we will try to show. Secondly, we will try to survey the use of light and shadow in the aforementioned pieces, with reference to the role they have played in the history of art and Western thought as strong metaphors

for determining the relationship between existence and non-existence and their grey areas.

If, from an aesthetic point of view, interactive art does not yet have a universal consensus on its definition, it is because, from the point of view of its creation and authorship, it already presents itself, as will be pointed out, as a pre-programmed experience (Rafaeli, 1988). We will show how the work of José Carlos Neves is mobilised as an instrument that enables a way of showing the operativity and intermittence of the artistic process and aesthetic experience.

Keywords

Interface • Interaction • Spectateur • Mechanism • Sound • Light • Shadow • Aesthetic Object

Introdução

As imagens técnicas não são espelhos, mas projectores. Elas traçam sentidos so-bre superfícies ilusórias e este traçar tornar-se para os seus receptores traços-de-vida. [...] É graças a este feedback que a imagem se altera, ficando melhor e melhor e mais parecida com o que os receptores querem que ela seja. (Flusser, 2011, p. 51)

Das indústrias dos jogos, passando pela publicidade, da indústria do cinema até aos museus e galerias de arte, sem descurar as instituições públicas que tutelam a cultura, vive-se hoje, ainda, sobre um escolho conceptual que designamos *Interactividade*. Muitas são as tentativas, providas de diversos quadrantes, de definir o conceito de *interactividade*, mas escassa é, também, a consensualidade da sua definição. O mesmo acontece com os seus efeitos e aplicabilidade prática, apesar de se saber que este termo move grandes quantidades de dinheiro e de atenção.

O termo «Arte Interactiva» tornou-se nas últimas duas décadas de uso universal, confundindo-se muitas vezes com a própria designação de *Media Art*, também esta um compósito que necessitaria de elucidação, mas que assumimos aqui como um termo que designa o sentido-comum do mundo da arte hoje, ou seja, toda aquela obra que tem suporte em tecnologias da comunicação. Contudo, uma revisão atenta da literatura sobre o tema, revela rapidamente que uma definição precisa deste conceito ainda não consegue atingir o estatuto de *topos* científico e institucional, funcionando precariamente como instrumento para designar uma nova experiência estética. Seja na sua delimitação histórica, seja na sua circunscrição conceptual, na sua prática artística efectiva e inclusive na sua institucionalização museológica, o conceito de *interactividade*, como marco definidor de uma obra artística, ainda não atingiu uma demarcação unívoca.

Esta ambiguidade prende-se, naturalmente, com a própria natureza daquilo que se convencionou chamar *interactividade* quando relacionado com uma peça de cariz artístico. Nos princípios dos anos noventa um estudioso das teorias da comunicação, Sheizaf Rafaeli, apresentava a seguinte tentativa de definir o conceito de *interactividade*, colocando o problema da sua catalogação como obra artística: «Interactividade é um termo usado num sentido muito amplo e com um encanto intuitivo, mas é ainda um conceito indefinido. Como forma de pensar a comunicação, ele mostra-se como um conceito com grande validade, mas numa explicação de base estreita, ele contém escasso consenso no que diz respeito ao seu sentido e no que diz respeito à sua recente emergência na verificação empírica do seu papel actual» (Rafaeli, 1988,

p. 110). Dez anos mais tarde, em 2002, Lev Manovich no seu livro *The Language of New Media*, aponta uma observação semelhante. Manovich procura estabelecer nesse texto limites precisos ao conceito de *interactividade*, introduzindo inclusive conceitos compostos como *branching-type interactivity*, *close interactivity* e *open interactivity*, *menu-based interactivity* (Manovich, 2002, p. 110), etc., que dariam uma maior e melhor especificação ao conceito *interactividade*. Alargando o conceito, em 2013, Manovich alerta para o facto de que «Desde que a teoria e a crítica dos novos media surgiram no início dos anos 90, foram escritos inúmeros textos sobre *interactividade*, *hipertexto*, *realidade virtual*, *ciberespaço*, *cibercultura*, *ciborgues*, etc. Mas nunca vi ninguém falar de “controlo da visualização” (*view control*). E, no entanto, esta é uma das novas técnicas mais fundamentais e radicais para trabalhar com a informação e os media de que dispomos actualmente» (Manovich, 2013, p. 75). Ainda que distante das implicações políticas evocadas por Manovich, a obra de JCN opera justamente nesse *controlo da visualização* enquanto desmonta o acesso ao sentido próprio do meio utilizado, remetendo para uma tarefa de reconstrução do *spectateur* enquanto é agente e ao mesmo tempo paciente da obra, ou seja, da interface enquanto instrumento mobilizador da *interactividade* (McLuhan, 1964; Kittler, 1999, 2006).

Mas entendida num sentido mais geral, ou melhor, colocada como conceito axial num domínio específico, a *interactividade* carece ainda de um sentido preciso porque, nas palavras de Manovich «unicamente significa a formulação do facto mais fundamental acerca dos computadores» (Manovich, 2002, p. 111). Podemos ir mais longe e afirmar que *interactivo* é por definição todo o sistema vivo.

O conceito de *interactividade* não tem sequer origem artística. A sua interacção com o domínio das artes é historicamente artificial; é um conceito importado. E toma-se *importação* aqui no seu sentido mais literal, a saber, enquanto designa uma acção de provocar, causar, introduzir, mas também de transmitir e convir. Em verdade, este conceito obtém a sua definição histórica na teoria da informação e remete para a possibilidade de poder simular artificialmente a experiência natural do homem. Ou seja, a *interactividade* é a simulação do diálogo que se estabelece entre dois sistemas autónomos vivos e, por isso e por necessidade, livres. Assim, o conceito *interactividade* é, quando este se refere ao domínio do artístico, uma metonímia do conceito de *feedback* em cibernética.

Assim, a obra de JCN opera sobre estas noções de convir, retroacção e síntese da percepção que a *interactividade* opera por via da prestação e evidência do momento negativo das relações entre a máquina, a obra e o sujeito, aquilo que convocamos aqui a partir da noção



Figura 1. *Amachina* (2014) - *spectacteur* em ação. Museu Bordalo Pinheiro

de *deconstrução* que introduz Derrida para a técnica da *escrita* e a sua relação com o Ocidente enquanto estrutura logocêntrica. As peças em revisão querem operar uma inversão e produzir uma destituição do sentido comum na forma de aceder ao interface. Assim, afirmava Derrida: os movimentos de desconstrução não solicitam estruturas do exterior. Eles só são possíveis e eficazes, só ajustam as suas esferas habitando essas estruturas. Habitando-as de uma certa maneira, porque habitamos sempre, e ainda mais quando não fazemos ideia. Operando necessariamente a partir de dentro, tomando de empréstimo à antiga estrutura todos os recursos estratégicos e económicos da subversão, isto é, sem poder isolar-lhe elementos e átomos, a empresa da desconstrução é sempre, de algum modo, levada pelo seu próprio trabalho. É aquilo que não se deixa de apontar com inquietação quando alguém começa a trabalhar num lugar da mesma habitação. Nenhum exercício está mais difundido actualmente, e deveríamos poder formalizar as regras» (Derrida, 1969, p. 39). Esta suspensão do já estar sempre *in media res* é uma das virtualidades constitutivas da obra em apreço.

Usamos assim, e para tal, o termo *spectacteur*, sempre presente na sua obra, e que se mostra efectivamente como uma forma de superação das antinomias que a interactividade, quando ligada à arte e à experiência estética, carrega de forma inerente (Bureau *et al.*, 1996, p. 62). No texto «Art et Technologie: la Monstration» (Bureau *et al.*, 1996, p. 62), o termo «*spectacteur*» é utilizado para identificar o tipo de público que, em exposições de «Arte Electrónica», toma as posições de espectador e actor, partilhando dessa forma o papel de exibicionista e voyeur. Uma análise etimológica superficial daquela palavra indica que combina a noção de contemplar e observar, do latim *spectare*, com aquela de um agente que faz a acção, o *acteur* (do latim *actoris*).

Importa referir que, de entre a miríade de termos utilizados pelos mais diversos autores, *spectacteur* está muito próximo do «espectador-agente» que Gomes Pinto utiliza em «Arte e Interactividade» (2013); usamos o primeiro por reforçar o cariz de actuação que se concretiza a partir do momento em que a experiência interactiva é realizada e observada. Um olhar mais próximo do termo, revela a etimologia do indo-europeu *spek-*, ou seja, observação, inspecção, mas também reflexo, quando o termo se constitui como raiz de *speculatio* e *speculare*, ou seja, representar. Esta origem revela já uma acção interna do sujeito, o actor, que remete para um fazer-no-mundo, com uma intervenção no universo das coisas, que não está presente no primeiro, mas que complementa o duplo sentido aqui presente: representar, enquanto resultado do efeito de especular, e o acto, enquanto resultado de um agir sobre as circunstâncias do mundo e na individuação de cada sujeito no acto de experimentar o que experimenta. Esta acepção remonta a Tomás de Aquino, havendo sido recuperada, entre outros, por G.W. Leibniz, e tem a seguinte formulação: *actiones sunt suppositorum* (Haan, 2014, *passim*). Mais uma vez, a tentativa de desconstrução que opera a obra, parece tornar-se evidente. É assim que Nuyen apresenta o problema e que aqui tomamos em consideração: «como tal, a abordagem dialéctica é uma forma de tornar “inteligível a experiência da (rica) totalidade” que “uma grande obra de arte comunica ao leitor”. A desconstrução acompanha a dialéctica ao chamar a nossa atenção para a complexidade e a riqueza de uma obra de arte, apontando os contrastes e as oposições, mas não nos leva de volta à síntese original e, por isso, “tem dificuldade em tornar inteligível a possibilidade desta síntese original”, dando origem à suspeita de que “a obra de arte na sua integridade se desintegrou ou desapareceu no próprio processo” (*ibid.*)» (Nuyen, 1989, p. 28).

Essa síntese operativa que JCN opera, encontra eco nas relações que Kittler estabelece, recordando a *apercepção pura* de Kant, ou seja, essa síntese da percepção que parece operar o interface e o seu correlato, a interactividade. Diz Kittler: «O eu penso, que desde Kant se supôs que deveria acompanhar toda as nossas representações, provavelmente só acompanha as nossas leituras. Tornou-se obsoleto logo quando o corpo e a alma se transformaram em objectos de experiência científica. A unidade da *apercepção* desintegrou-se num grande número de sub-rotinas que, como tais, podem ser localizadas pelos fisiologistas em diferentes centros do cérebro e que os engenheiros podem reconstruir em múltiplas máquinas. Aquilo que é o espírito – o não-simulável centro do homem – negado pela sua própria definição» (Kittler, 1999, p. 279). A obra de JCN desmonta, justamente, essa possibilidade, ou seja, desconstrói a síntese operada por via de uma negação, a que aludiremos mais adiante.



Figura 2. *Amachina* (2014) – esfera em movimento ativado pelo *spectateur*. Museu Bordalo Pinheiro.

Arte interactiva necessita e estabelece-se como uma interface onde o espectador joga um papel activo na actualização da peça em causa, fundação e papel que está previamente desenhada, ainda que possa parecer aberta, facto que a obra do JCN procura demonstrar. É assim, por exemplo, que Vilém Flusser vê a interacção entre a imagem técnica e os humanos: «As imagens técnicas não são espelhos, mas projectores. Elas traçam sentidos sobre superfícies ilusórias e este traçar tornar-se para os seus receptores traços-de-vida. As pessoas devem seguir esse traçado. Pelo menos esta é a função que as imagens técnicas têm no presente e por isso é criada uma estrutura social, na qual os homens não se agrupam em redor de problemas, mas em torno das imagens técnicas. [...] É graças a este *feedback* que a imagem se altera, ficando melhor e melhor e mais parecida com o que os receptores querem que ela seja; isto é, as imagens tornam-se mais e mais parecidas com o que os receptores querem que elas sejam e assim os receptores ficam mais e mais parecidos com o que as imagens querem que eles sejam. Isto é, resumindo, a interacção (*Verkehr*) entre imagem e as pessoas» (Flusser, 1999, p. 51). Interactividade, se assim lermos o termo alemão que Flusser utiliza, *Verkehr* (circulação, tráfico, ligação), tornou-se hoje mais *palavra de ordem* que um descritivo de um *agir* artístico. Como que um imperativo: o dever de fazer, a que a noção de *spectateur* dá conta, desmontando.

A arte interactiva não é somente algo que se produz mediante a tecnologia, mas surge sempre como uma obra que tem como *medium* próprio a tecnologia. A obra de arte interactiva, grande parte da produção artística contemporânea, só existe quando um espectador com ela se relaciona activamente. Obra e interface mantêm uma relação de co-pertença. A interactividade em arte remete necessariamente para um deslocamento e uma transformação do clássico espectador em actor, *spectateur*. Na arte interactiva, no uso actual do termo, o espectador transforma-se,

ele mesmo, em agente. Mas num agente com um estatuto obrigatório. A obra é também criação sua, por assim dizer, porque sem a sua intervenção a obra não existe.

Foi isso, pelo menos, o que pretendeu Nam June Paik com a sua peça *Electronic Television*, apresentada pela primeira vez na exposição «Exposition of Music», na Galeria Parnass de Wuppertal, em 1963. Nessa peça, Nam June Paik convidava o espectador a construir a sua própria música ou imagem. De cada vez que se activava a obra, ainda que o espectador fosse o mesmo, a música ou imagem seriam sempre diferentes, como acontece nas peças de JCN talvez seja esta a primeira vez que, em realidade, se possa falar da presença de interactividade numa peça artística. Mas interacção e participação são, em arte, conceitos completamente diferentes. A participação do espectador como elemento constitutivo de uma peça artística é algo que se conhece desde os princípios do século XX. Contudo, a participação não traz consigo problemas que a interactividade coloca. Na participação não existe propriamente co-autoria, como na interactividade, facto que a obra de JCN pretende levar a cabo. A participação do espectador em arte é meramente um gesto do autor em direccionar a atenção daquele. A obra de JCN é tanto *ergon* quanto é *energeia*, ou seja, forma acabada, mas ao mesmo tempo, um motor que causa movimento, processo. Como se causasse

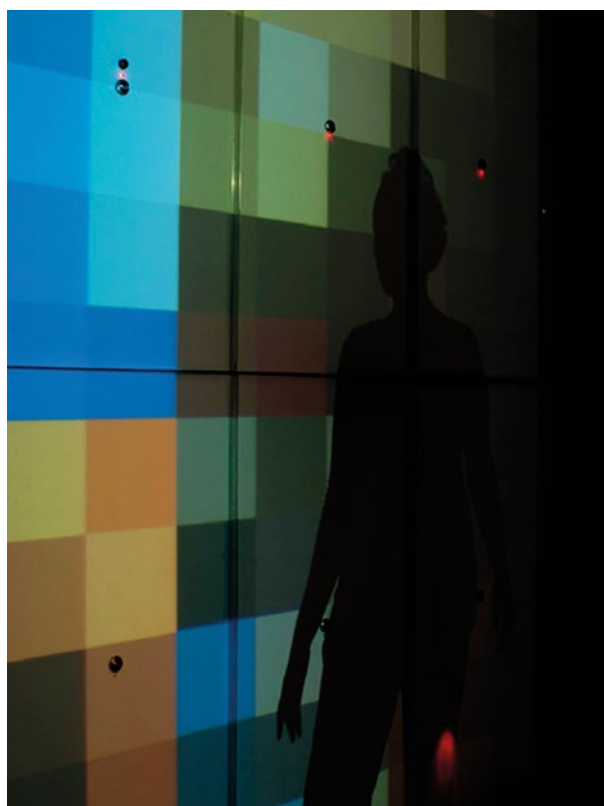


Figura 3. *Split Screen* (2010) – detalhe. Museu Arts Santa Mónica, Barcelona



Figura 4. Step By Step (2010) – estudo instalação. Teatro São Luíz, Lisboa

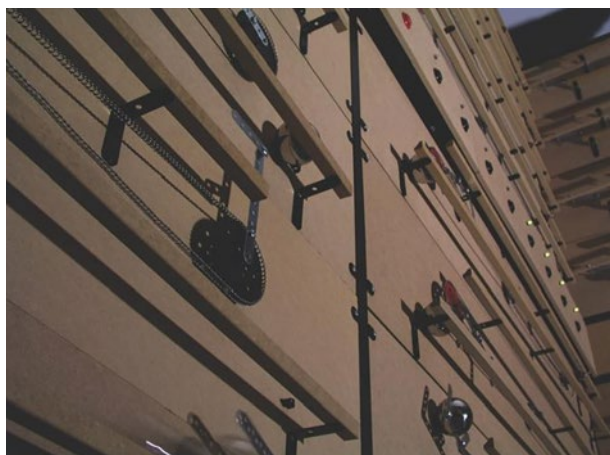


Figura 5. Amachina (2014) – vista parcial do interior. Museu Bordalo Pinheiro

movimento, mediante as intermitências que estas obras criam, mediante a negatividade que elas possibilitam.

Assim, se algum consenso existe na determinação de uma «arte interactiva», este remete para a necessidade de a criação artística se realizar mediante a tecnologia e da contemplação artística se der *em* tecnologia e mediante a acção do espectador, portanto, mediante a acção humana livre e não meramente dirigida. Claro está que semelhante consenso é um consenso social e não um consenso propriamente estético ou fundado em critérios estéticos, seja qual for a natureza destes. Numa primeira aproximação, e recordando-se a teoria institucional da arte, pode assim dizer-se que se inscrevem na «arte interactiva» todas as peças que, de uma forma ou de outra, se encontram dentro de instituições que socialmente têm como função a promoção, exposição ou venda de obras artísticas, mas não existindo ainda uma definição estreita. O único critério possível para uma definição mais vasta é a obrigatoriedade de o espectador agir sobre a obra, sobre o interface.

A catalogação da obra como *arte interactiva* depende muitas vezes da instituição e sempre que a peça atenda às condições técnicas da sua realização e exposição-acção *in loco*. Contudo, desde o ponto de vista estético, esta carece ainda de fundamentação.

O interface, enquanto cerne da obra interactiva, é indissociável da obra de JCN *Shadow Machine* e *Interface a 4 tempos para: (...)*, fazem parte de um processo de questionamento e experimentação artística em torno do interface. Este foi ganhando independência do computador enquanto intérprete de *inputs* e processador de conteúdos para um sistema de *output*. *Split Screen* (2010, figura 3), passo seminal, integra num paralelepípedo de três por dois metros a função de ecrã, interface e processamento. Ecrã, enquanto reflexo das imagens de um projetor; interface, por integrar um sensor de distância; processamento, por abrigar um computador que processa sons, imagens e *inputs* de um sensor.

Em *Step By Step* (2010, figura 4) reforça-se a noção de interface enquanto artefacto central da obra. Mantém-se a forma de paralelepípedo, mas desta feita enquanto plataforma que abriga sensores de pressão e luzes que marcam o pisar dos primeiros. O *spectacteur* que sobe à plataforma, provoca alterações na imagem projetada e na composição sonora que João Trindade criou para esta peça. Ainda que com um foco mais claro no potencial do interface, *Step by Step* continua a depender de um computador para o processamento de imagens e sons.

Em *Amachina* (2014, figura 5), o interface é objeto de experiência estética capaz de sobreviver ao computador. A face interior da estrutura em forma de “U” com três por dois metros e meio, é composta por sistemas mecânicos responsáveis por manter trinta e duas esferas de metal em movimento. A activação sequencial de alguns destes mecanismos por via da pressão em botões, quando dentro das condicionantes mecânicas e eléctricas pré-definidas, terão como outputs um sinal sonoro, o acender de um dos dois leds finais e, caso a *Amachina* esteja ligada a um computador, o equivalente ao pressionar os números 0 e 1 de um teclado. Este é então um interface virtualmente inútil, onde a experiência estética depende apenas e só do interface. Em *Amachina*, o interface é a «obra interactiva». Esta será a linha orientadora do processo conceptual de *Shadow Machine* e *Interface a 4 Tempos para: (...)*, as quais partilham ainda as intermitências de sombra e luz como *output*.

Sombra, luz

Em *A República*, Platão imagina uma sociedade humana primitiva aprisionada numa caverna. Estas pessoas só podem olhar para a parede da caverna, que está coberta de sombras lançadas por objectos do mundo exterior. O

que é digno de nota é que estes habitantes da caverna não têm consciência que existe um mundo exterior, de coisas e das suas relações: estão apenas em contacto com sombras, meros umbrais ou sombra das coisas. É, pois, necessário que se libertem das suas amarras, se virem e encarem o mundo iluminado para obterem uma verdadeira compreensão, consolidando a ideia de que o que sempre viram foram silhuetas (linhas de sombra) projectadas pela luz do fogo que criam uma sombra, um mero contorno. Esta alegoria afirma que só podem alcançar a plena compreensão das coisas quando enfrentarem a luz. Assim, a sombra é apenas uma projeção de uma materialidade difícil de subsumir. Em Platão, a sombra é o traço, o ausente tornado presente, mas na sua incompletude. As sombras são sempre imagens ambíguas e pertencem ao domínio de uma recordação: apresentam o que está ausente. O que se segue pretende ser uma reflexão sobre o conceito de sombra e a sua relação com o registo. A sombra como o interior e o exterior, o latente e o manifesto, o escondido e o revelado, tal como é apresentado em *4 tempos para: (...)* e *Shadow Machine*.

Esta tradição, a do pensamento sobre a dicotomia luz vs. Sombra, é longa e percorre todo o pensamento Ocidental, ainda que também tenha presença em outras tradições, como a islâmica e a hebraica, que aqui nos escusamos a tratar de forma temática. Este contraste sublinha o facto de que o ser não é simples, sublinhado que o ser é essencialmente e sempre um fenómeno discreto, algo que aparece ou vem à luz – como a antiga palavra grega *aletheia* parece indicar e que foi motor do pensamento de Martin Heidegger (Kreell, 1974, *passim*²). Ser um indivíduo no mundo é existir como uma singularidade; essa singularidade, quando destituída de toda relação, também se pode designar por “coisa”. As definições do termo “existente” e de termos relacionados como “coisa”, “o quê”, “isso”, “o que é dado” e “o que é afirmado” – ou seja, todas as formas deícticas que possibilitam o apontar para... sem designar –, são resumidas por Avicena, mas também foram apontadas por filósofos ocidentais ao longo da sua história. Recordemos, por exemplo, e pelo impacto que teve, a afirmação do conhecido texto de Martin Heidegger *O que é uma coisa?* (1967/1985) e onde é claro sobre este assunto: «Do leque das questões básicas da metafísica, colocaremos aqui esta única questão: O que é uma coisa? A questão é bastante antiga. O que permanece sempre novo nela é apenas o facto de ter de ser colocada uma e outra vez». (Heidegger,

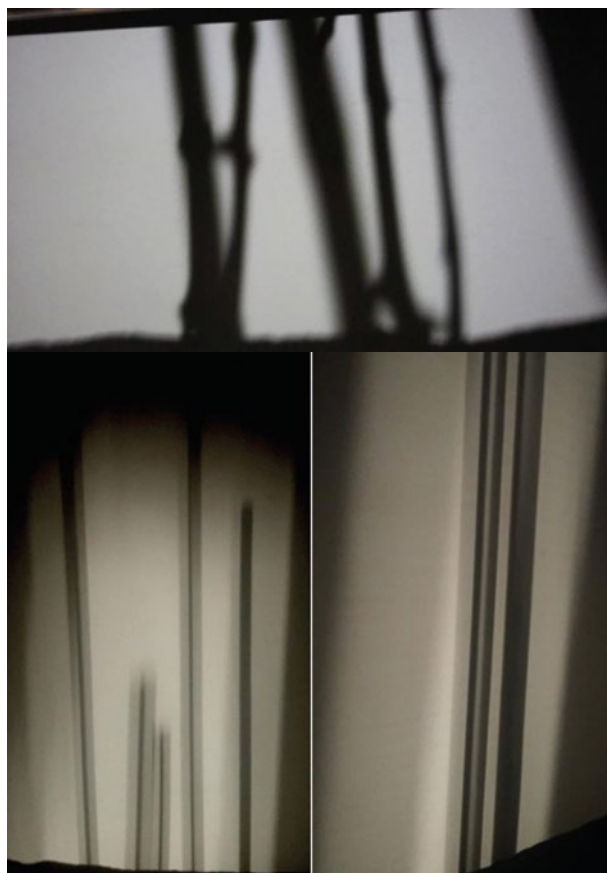


Figura 6. *Shadow Machine* (2023) – estudo de sombras. Registos do processo

1967/1985, p. 1). Mas também onde se pode ler que: «é necessário, portanto, que sejamos capazes de entender o termo “coisa” tanto num sentido mais restrito como num sentido mais amplo. O sentido mais restrito ou limitado de “coisa” é aquilo que pode ser tocado, alcançado ou visto, ou seja, o que está-à-mão (*das Vorhandene*). No sentido mais lato do termo, “coisa” é todo o assunto ou transacção, algo que se encontra neste ou naquele estado, as coisas que nesta ou naquela condição, as coisas que acontecem no mundo – ocorrências, acontecimentos» (Heidegger, 1967/1985, p. 5).

Estes termos servem como pedra angular do conhecimento e denotam a ampla relatividade da totalidade das “coisas”. Apontamos aqui a centralidade do conceito de existente na filosofia de Avicena e Heidegger uma vez que constitui a base de todo o conhecimento e compreensão (Lizzini, 2021), mas também porque mostram como a obra de JCN oscila sempre entre a *coisalidade* tomada em sentido restrito e a *coisalidade* tomada no sentido amplo, ou seja, enquanto relação. Esta relação é trazida pelo jogo de luz e sombras que encontramos na sua obra. Assim, e recordando o importante estudo de Victor I. Stoichita, podemos dar um salto e afirmar que «Quando a pintura

2 Diz Kreel: «In 1964 Heidegger cited as the persistent task of his thought the meaning of *αλήθεια* – no longer to be translated as “truth” but to be pondered as *unconcealment* or “the clearing that first grants Being and thinking and their presencing to and for each other”» (Kreel, 1974, 79).

surgiu, inseria-se no tema ausência/presença (ausência do corpo; presença da sua projeção). A história da arte é entrecortada pela dialéctica desta relação» (Stoichita, 1997, p. 7). O aparecimento da pintura representativa Ocidental é uma expressão do registo, uma tentativa de tornar materialmente presente o ausente através do esboço que se pode traçar quando se desenha uma sombra de qualquer coisa. A arte é assim do domínio da coisalidade, mas também do domínio das relações representadas para essa realidade, ou seja, as sombras que projectam a *coisa* sem mostrar a coisa em si mesma e que a obra de JCN põe em movimento.

As sombras são a sua própria essência e um elemento das primeiras tentativas humanas de fixar algo no tempo e na sua singularidade. A sombra, quando fixada, é o primeiro *doppelgänger* inventado, ou melhor, descoberto, pelo homem. Uma “coisa” tornada dupla, uma primeira cópia do mundo, uma primeira forma de acção do sujeito sobre o mundo e sobre o seu sentido. A sombra é *eidos*, se quiséssemos colocá-la num termo de platónico: a nossa figura de uma coisa singular, mas sem “a coisa em si”. Podemos remontar esta ideia ao pensamento grego e latino, por exemplo, em Plínio, o Velho, na *História Natural*, XXXV, 11 e onde se pode ler: «A arte da pintura desenvolveu-se, finalmente, na invenção da luz e da sombra, servindo o contraste alternado das cores para aumentar o efeito de cada uma. Num período posterior, mais uma vez, foi adicionado o lustre, uma coisa completamente diferente da luz. A gradação entre o lustre e a luz, por um lado, e a sombra, por outro, chamava-se “tonos”; enquanto a mistura das várias tonalidades, e a sua passagem uma para a outra, era conhecida como “harmoge”». Mais tarde, encontramos-lo em Quintiliano, na sua *Institutio oratoria*, X, ii, 7, onde se pode ler, na senda de Plínio «A arte da pintura ter-se-ia limitado a traçar uma linha em torno de uma sombra projectada à luz do sol».

A questão do registo, como presença de uma ausência, está também presente na teoria do inconsciente estabelecida pelos primeiros psicanalistas. No seu livro *History of the Shadow*, Stoichita descreve a relação entre presença e ausência no contexto da arte e da representação. A citação relata a profunda ligação entre o aparecimento da pintura Ocidental, o registo e o conceito de registo como presença de uma ausência. De acordo com Stoichita, a questão da ausência/presença é intrínseca às origens da pintura, especialmente quando se trata de arte representacional. A premissa principal deste tema é que, enquanto o corpo *corpóreo* é projetado na tela, também está ausente durante o processo de pintura. A pintura torna-se, essencialmente, um método para trazer o ausente para o mundo material e, remete assim à possibilidade de algo poder ser efeito de uma causa desconhecida. Ou seja, de que a pintura remete sempre a uma pulsão inconsciente que se materializa

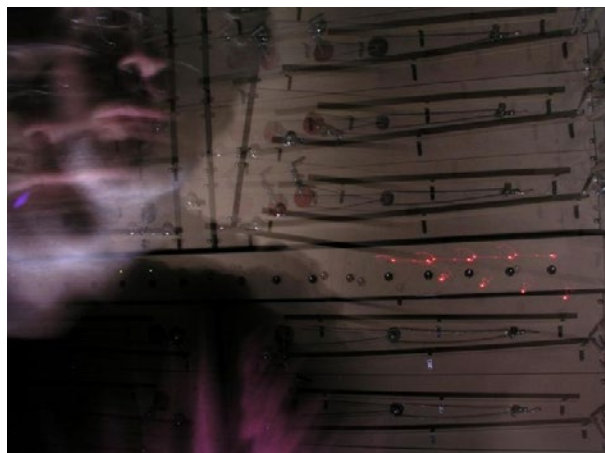


Figura 7. *Amachina* (2014) – registo de movimento. Museu Bordalo Pinheiro

não somente no traçar e no traçado, mas também no perscrutar do sujeito, a saber, que o *spectateur* é uma figura com uma longa tradição, ainda que não tivesse conhecido essa designação. Assim, e de acordo com Stoichita, esta ligação tem desempenhado um papel dialéctico ao longo da história da arte. Na sua busca de representação, os artistas executam uma dança difícil entre destilar a essência do ausente e torná-la material nas suas criações. Uma componente fundamental do percurso artístico de JCN é esta investigação dinâmica da presença e da ausência, da luz e das sombras.

Além disso, Stoichita sugere que, com o desenvolvimento da psicanálise, a questão do registo como presença de uma ausência, ganhou proeminência tanto na arte como no pensamento. O conceito de inconsciente, que é onde os registos e os desejos reprimidos vivem como ausências da mente consciente, foi apresentado pela primeira vez por Sigmund Freud. Este mundo inconsciente representa a ideia de que o registo é mais do que uma simples recordação; é antes a existência de algo que, parecendo ausente, tem frequentemente um impacto significativo nos estados mentais e comportamentos das pessoas. Stoichita conduz-nos sobre a relação profunda e duradoura entre representação, registo e a oscilação, entre ausência e presença numa rica tapeçaria da arte e da experiência humana. Sublinha, assim, as formas como a arte e os registos se cruzam, fornecendo uma visão sobre como a arte tem sido um veículo para tornar o ausente táctil ao longo da história. Esse cruzamento é instigante na obra em apreço.

De acordo com Freud (1917), os registos emergem do inconsciente como um vestígio de um material reprimido. Sugere-se, pois, que os registos e as experiências não estão consolidados na mente, mas podem ressurgir sob várias formas, incluindo deslizes de linguagem, pormenores esquecidos e hiatos não resolvidos. Os registos,

especialmente as que estão ligadas a material reprimido ou inconsciente, podem ter uma profunda influência no nosso comportamento e bem-estar mental (Fiorini, 2009). O seu aluno, Carl Jung, desenvolveu esta ideia ao apresentar a sua teoria da sombra. Jung vê a sombra como a parte reprimida, e muitas vezes escondida, da psique humana. É o aspecto do eu que é frequentemente mantido afastado da *persona*, o eu que não é normalmente apresentado aos outros (Jung, 2013). A psicanálise vê a sombra, em geral, como uma espécie de ausência, que muitas vezes se faz presente através do registo, de deslizos de linguagem e de certos impulsos incontroláveis. Pensa-se que o funcionamento interno do inconsciente é ilusório para as representações externas da consciência. McMillan (2018) reflecte sobre as associações das redes neuronais latentes da concepção junguiana do inconsciente à luz do conceito de *rizoma* de Deleuze (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980). Deleuze postula que a livre associação de imagens, arquétipos, padrões e motivos é emergente por natureza e vem à tona para a cognição a partir de uma ausência (McMillan, 2018). Por conseguinte, os registos, tal como as sombras, são uma interacção entre presença e ausência. E é justamente esse jogo que está pre-sente nas obras de JCN, não só como motivos que as impulsionam, mas também como instrumentos que criam uma experiência vicária dessa relação consciente/inconsciente. Neste sentido, mas o *spectateur* emerge como um ser mediúnico que consolida a obra artística dentro de um universo conceptual mais alargado.

É neste sentido que o filósofo alemão Hegel pensa a relação entre o pensamento e a realidade com uma metáfora da luz e da sombra: «A luz pura e a escuridão pura são dois vazios que são a mesma coisa. Algo só pode ser distinguido [*unterscheiden*] em determinada luz ou escuridão (a luz é determinada pela escuridão e assim é a luz escurecida, e a escuridão é determinada pela luz, é a escuridão iluminada), e por esta razão, que é apenas a luz escurecida [*getribtes Licht*] e a escuridão iluminada que têm dentro de si o momento da diferença e são, portanto, determinado ser [*Dasein*]» (Hegel, ([1807]/1979), I, 1, cap. 1, ii).

No seu livro *Enfoldment and Infinity*, Laura U. Marks apresenta a ideia do “Batin” e de “Zahir” no contexto da arte dos media, explicando como estes termos, que derivam do sufismo (misticismo islâmico), colidem com as obras e práticas artísticas contemporâneas. A análise que Marks faz do “Batin” e do “Zahir” demonstra os diversos aspectos da arte dos media, particularmente no que diz respeito à interacção entre o revelado e o oculto. Os termos “Batin” e “Zahir” têm origem no sufismo, que é o ramo místico do Islão. “Zahir” designa o exterior, o visível e o exotérico, enquanto “Batin” representa o oculto, o esotérico e o interno. Segundo Marks, a arte

dos media, funde estes dois domínios, tornando mais difícil distinguir entre o que é revelado e o que é mantido escondido. Assim, neste contexto, “Batin” encapsula os processos subjacentes, os algoritmos e as estruturas digitais que muitas vezes permanecem ocultos à percepção imediata do espectador, enquanto “Zahir”, por outro lado, diz respeito aos aspectos observáveis e sensoriais da obra de arte, às experiências visuais e auditivas tornadas acessíveis ao público (Marks, 2011). Ora, uma vez mais, a obra de JCN encontra um contexto rizomático, uma vez que, como aponta van der Klei o «[...] conceito de rizoma criativo é essencial na procura de informação porque permite uma autonomia do “material de leitura” sem ter de organizar o utilizador de uma forma restritiva» (van der Klei, 2002, p. 51).

Neste sentido, a história da sombra ou a presença da sombra nunca desapareceu da mente humana e continua ainda a fazer-se problema, mesmo usando as tecnologias digitais: «Todos os objectos dos novos media (imagens, filmes, som, acções) são a manifestação perceptível do código. Desdobram-se do código facilmente e sem tensão, porque é isso que normalmente se pretende que façam» (Marks, 2011, p. 246). Marks defende que a arte dos media encena uma interacção entre “Batin” e “Zahir”, criando um espaço onde o oculto e o visível, a luz e a sombra, coexistem. Esta convergência desafia os modos tradicionais de percepção e representação, convidando os espectadores a envolverem-se com a obra de arte em múltiplas camadas, ou seja, convoca o *spectateur* como foi apresentado anteriormente. A manipulação dos meios digitais pelo artista e o envolvimento interactivo do público, contribuem para uma interacção dinâmica. Em última análise, a discussão de Marks sublinha a intrincada relação entre o misticismo, o pensamento mágico da filosofia do Renascimento e a arte dos media contemporâneos, salientando o modo como a arte dos media funciona como um local de convergência, ou, em termos de Hegel, «a pura luz e a pura escuridão», misturam-se para produzir experiências ricas e multifacetadas. A sua exploração lança luz sobre as profundas implicações destes conceitos místicos no domínio da expressão artística na era digital (Marks, 2011), mas que têm referências no Renascimento e continuam a marcar presença até aos dias de hoje. Um bom exemplo encontra-se num esforço profundo para imaginar um mundo vivo feito de sombras, como JCN realiza na peça *Shadow Machine* (2023, figura 8).

A relação entre arte, registo e sombra foi alargada pela figuração do mito de Narciso, que olha para o seu reflexo na água, funcionando esta como um espelho. Narciso estende a mão tentando apropriar-se da sua própria imagem. Aqui a sombra aparece como um efeito secundário da origem da obra de arte, mas funciona como uma projecção que contém um conteúdo preciso:



Figura 8. *Shadow Machine* (2023) – momento partilhado de interação. Espaço Stª. Catarina, Lisboa

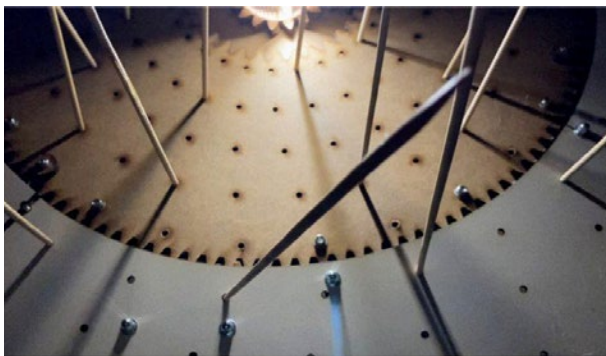


Figura 9. *Shadow Machine* (2023) – pormenor do mecanismo

cores, linhas, semelhanças. Leon Battista Alberti, em *De Pictura*, debruça-se sobre este mesmo problema e assinala que o que era um traço, se transforma numa obsessão de cópia e apropriação. As sombras precisam de cores para traçar um mimetismo da realidade, da coisa, e um processo que vem tematizado desde o *Timeu* de Platão, onde um *демиurgo* (28a6), um semi-deus, cria imagens semelhantes à realidade. Na argumentação de Platão, isto constitui-se num problema de relação entre sombra e realidade, querendo proceder-se, como que por impulso do inconsciente, à mimetização da segunda. O antigo problema da sombra e da realidade revive aqui, mas por diferentes camadas de aproximação entre realidade e imagem: na obra de JCN vemos plasmar-se o *omnes umbra hominis lines circumducta*; traduzindo e actualizando, “todas as sombras do homem são delimitadas”. Esta fuga é uma continuação do problema das sombras e resulta na mesma aporia. Giordano Bruno tenta debruçar-se sobre este problema e usar a linguagem para descrever as imagens, numa dialética entrelaçada (Bruno, [1582]/2020). Para este, as sombras e as projecções no espelho constituem o mesmo problema, mas com diferentes camadas de abstracção, de maior nível de definição e que ligam os mitos que relacionam as sombras como projecção no real e a ideia de um animar,

dar vida, de um criar imagens reais próximas dos objectos externos. Por projecção, a sombra procede a uma internalização. Com as possibilidades técnicas disponíveis desde os finais do século XIX, pode ser feita uma ligação entre esta ideia, tão difundida ao longo da História, de copiar o mundo das coisas; podemos inclusive dizer que a obra de JCN procede a uma animização, a um dar vida, um criar vida concreta, movimento e tempo, numa imagem. É a arte do movimento e da fixação que estão aqui em causa, como se a sua obra fosse um aspecto de uma arqueologia dos media (Parikka, 2012) e, por isso mesmo, da arte.

Máquinas de Sombras

A noção de «máquina», que *Shadow Machine* traz no título, é o ponto central nesta peça. Todas as suas partes, ainda que cuidadas na vertente estética, cumprem uma função. São parte de um mecanismo que visa a construção de um espaço cénico composto por sombras em movimento, obtidas pela ocultação intermitente de um foco de luz por via de delgados cilindros de madeira inseridos em múltiplos orifícios de um prato em rotação. Foco de luz e prato, rodam em sentido contrário partilhando um mesmo centro. Os limites físicos da máquina são definidos por um anel imóvel que ajuda à contenção do prato central, que oculta e fixa o sistema de rodas dentadas responsável pelo movimento do prato e um interruptor mecânico. O dito anel cumpre ainda a função de proteger os sensores de luz que são responsáveis por enviar valores de intensidade de luz ao sistema computacional a cada activação do interruptor, por ciclo completo do prato.

No que ao sistema computacional diz respeito, este é constituído por um Arduino UNO (AU), um Motor Shield (MS) associado a um gear motor DC e um WAV trigger (WT). Reduzindo ao essencial a interacção entre os três, temos o MS que é controlado em lógica de ON/OFF pelo AU, que por sua vez envia essas ordens conforme a leitura que lhe chega do interruptor mecânico – quando pressionado o motor. Para além desta imobilização do motor, a leitura de activação do interruptor dá início a um contador no AU que define o tempo de paragem do motor, concebido de forma a permitir a interacção – retirar e/ou colocar os cilindros de madeira – e a leitura estável dos sensores de luz. Já a média dos valores enviados por estes sensores, irá definir quantos dos cinco sets de *loops* armazenados no WT serão activados em simultâneo: o intervalo mais baixo de uma escala de cinco ativará apenas um, já o mais alto resultará na audição de cinco *loops* em simultâneo. Ou seja, quanto mais luz receberem os sensores, mais cheio e imersivo será o espaço sonoro. Ainda a este propósito, importa dizer que os *loops* de

cada grupo são chamados de forma aleatória de uma amostra também de cinco, procurando-se desta forma a renovação e imprevisibilidade da experiência sonora.

O ambiente sonoro, desenhado por João Trindade, resultará de uma composição aleatória de cinco conjuntos de cinco *loops*, que são activados/desactivados pelo jogo de sombra e luz. Teremos uma narrativa de interferência sonora, construída a partir de um acorde em *Lá menor*, que se transforma ao longo de cinco entidades sonoras, tendo sempre como raiz um ritmo muito simples em colcheias. Uma tentativa de contraponto, por vezes caótico, por vezes não tão caótico, com as dispersões e compressões de luz e sombra. Sem querermos entrar em grandes demonstrações, a escolha do cinco remete para a quinta letra do alfabeto hebraico, *He*, ou seja, \aleph , que encontra a representação da pura espiritualidade, sendo que, por exemplo, a pronúncia de *He* (\aleph) é apenas um sopro, como convém à sua conotação de pura existência espiritual. \aleph é apenas aspirado, sem haver necessidade de articulação da aspiração na garganta, boca ou lábios.

Tal como qualquer obra interativa, esta *Shadow Machine* necessita um interveniente, um espectador ativo, um *spectacteur* disponível à interacção e descoberta do mecanismo e seus resultados. Deste processo resultarão infindáveis variações cénicas, irrepetíveis se tivermos em conta as oscilações de um mecanismo que abraça folgas e imprecisões. Este processo de co-autoria que os artistas delegam naqueles intervenientes, não se esgota nesse ponto. Os planos de maquinação dos diversos componentes, em larga medida obtidos por corte a laser, bem como programação e circuitos eléctricos, serão partilhados pelo público em geral por via de ficheiros vários e um “manual de montagem”. Procura-se assim expandir o princípio de co-autoria à transformação literal da obra.

A noção de co-autoria e os processos de produção, são dois dos pontos que a *Shadow Machine* partilha com *Interface a 4 tempos para: (...)* (2023, figura 10). Nesta, quatro rodas dentadas marcam tempos distintos a partir de um mesmo compasso, cabendo a quem as manipula marcar as sincronias e dessincronias de um interface mecânico, exposto, sem lugares inacessíveis à curiosidade. Uma transparência que se estende à partilha do processo técnico num convite à sua reelaboração. Trata-se de um interface para luz, sombras e som que pressupõe a co-autoria de terceiros. Essa noção não se esgota no *spectacteur* que o irá manipular, podendo ser estendida a intervenções de co-autores no elemento espacial e da composição sonora. A cada intervenção, é então recriada uma instalação no espaço e/ou no som que deixará de existir no momento da sua desmontagem. São disto exemplo o ecrã escultórico que Selma Pereira preparou para a exposição na Artech 2023 e a *Mendax sonata* de João Trindade que a completou nos dois momentos expositivos da obra, até à data. Se na Artech

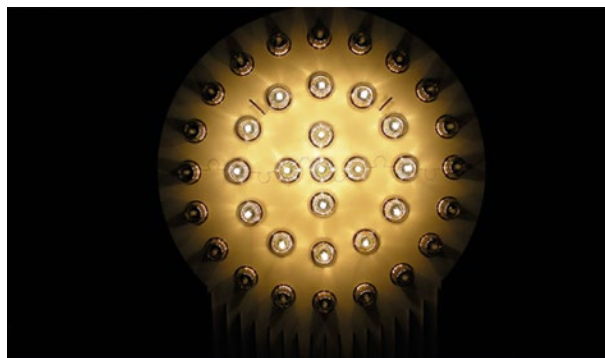


Figura 10. *Interface a 4 tempos para: (...)* (2023) – dois dos três conjuntos de luzes activados

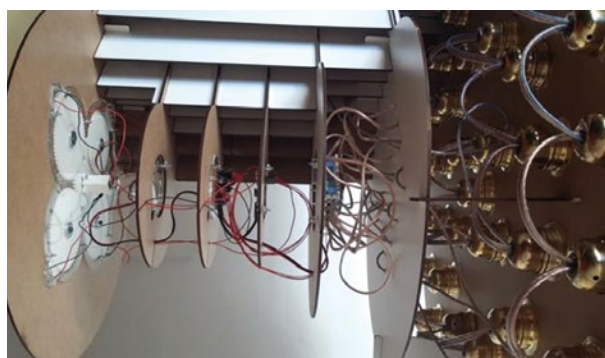


Figura 11. *Interface a 4 tempos para: (...)* (2023) – mecanismo e componentes electrónicos

se optou por não completar o nome, já na estreia em 2017 no Festival In Shadow, o “(...)” deu lugar ao nome da composição do Trindade – *Interface a 4 tempos para: Mendax sonata*, foi então o nome que levava a folha de sala para sublinhar a co-autoria do momento expositivo.

O sistema mecânico deste interface a quatro tempos funde-se com o sistema de interacção. Assim, num mesmo painel, estão um botão *on/off*, um manipulador de rotação (potenciómetro) e quatro rodas dentadas. Quando iniciado o mecanismo, as rodas movem-se síncronas numa velocidade modelável pela regulação do potenciómetro, provocando a activação de quatro interruptores a cada volta de trezentos e sessenta graus. Esta activação é feita pelo contato de elementos móveis integrados nas rodas, que podem ser manipulados de modo independente para obter tempos diferentes a partir de um mesmo *loop*. Deste processo resultam dois outputs distintos: uma dimensão de intermitência luz/sombra, por via da activação do círculo de lâmpadas correspondentes durante o tempo de pressão referido; a pressão de quatro teclas de um teclado *bluetooth*, sugeridas por um microprocessador que envia para a atmosfera aqueles dados ao ritmo dos sinais eléctricos dos interruptores. No caso da *Mendax sonata*, estas «letras» ativavam três *loops* sonoros que

reiniciam a cada *input* recebido e uma base comum controlada pela roda que controla o tempo de ligar/desligar da peça.

Quanto à eletrónica, o sistema combina circuitos executados de raiz, um conjunto de quatro *relays* e uma placa Adafruit Feather, que tem como única função enviar via bluetooth na forma de input de teclado os momentos de activação dos interruptores. Já os componentes mecânicos são peças concebidas de raiz em impressão em 3D, exceto o motor. Por fim, a estrutura é composta por um conjunto de peças montadas por encaixe, obtidas por corte a laser de placas de aglomerado de madeira de face branca.

Processo e desarticulação: coda

O uso dos meios e do Interface possibilita que as variantes de *Interface a 4 tempos para: (...)*, sejam um projecto que podemos classificar como um acção que procede à inversão, que é uma inversão da arte ou da ideia da arte para apresentar a arte na sua efemeridade! Ao percorrer o *modus faciendi* de JCN, fomos, por diversas vezes, dando connosco a pensar com ele através do processo de desarticulação que este opera na sua obra.

Do ponto de vista de uma descrição, o seu fazer é o de um criador, que os gregos designavam por *technikos* e que não tinha uma conotação pejorativa como ainda tem para alguns de nós, inseridos que estamos na tradição da universidade europeia pensada por Goethe e os irmãos Humboldt; a sua obra é a de alguém que pensa ao fazer e cujos princípios estão dados na tentativa do fazer ao pensar. Não se trata de um jogo de palavras que queira fazer-se aqui para confundir, trata-se sim de uma descrição de um método a que A. N. Whitehead chamou processo e que aqui recordamos para determinar a disposição que a sua obra deixa; diz Whitehead: «a coerência, que o sistema procura preservar, é a descoberta de que o processo, ou concrecência, de qualquer entidade actual envolve outras entidades actuais entre os seus componentes. Neste sentido, a óbvia solidariedade do mundo recebe a sua explicação» (Whitehead, 1929, p. 7). O conceito de concrecência, que remete para a condensação de um líquido, refere-se também a um movimento de crescimento em conjunto, em união com outro elemento; esta peça, em concreto, é uma forma de concrecência. A ideia que o JCN procura, e que procura a sua Obra, é uma ideia que persiste desde a antiguidade clássica e que percorre – *ronda*, para recordar a célebre formulação de Karl Marx –, o pensamento Ocidental. Essa ideia é a de negatividade. A ideia de uma tal entidade abstracta e especulativa deve-se a muitos pensadores, mas quem melhor a formou, foi, a nosso entender, G. F. W. Hegel, outro ponto final da História do Pensamento Ocidental,



Figura 12. *Amachina* (2014) – vista parcial da zona de interação

ao fazer coincidir o início de um processo àquilo a que designa por negatividade pura: «a pura negatividade, o princípio do processo» (Hegel, [1807]/1979, p. 227).

Claro está que a negatividade é um momento – que iremos dizer, uma forma de tempo – que possibilita a diferença, mas também a verosimilhança. E verosimilhança porque é só uma aparência de verdade, não ainda o momento de recolhimento, de equilíbrio, supressão ou superação do momento, que Hegel designava com um magnífico termo e que em português soaria a pleonasma se literalmente traduzido: *Aufhebung*, superação, mas também poderia ser traduzido por cancelamento, suspensão, sublação. Processo e negatividade: estas são as palavras-chaves que pautam a orientação da ideia que lançamos sobre a obra de JCN. Uma ideia que se constata no resolver um problema pelo fazer: criar um superador de problemas, o interface, que se constituísse como um momento negativo do próprio interface. Parece ser este o termo e o utensílio capazes de anularem qualquer noção de verosimilhança, porque as realiza a todas, onde tudo pode ser trocado, onde tudo pode ser intercambiado, mutável, transmutável, transmissível, aceite a partir desse dispositivo universal que é a máquina alfanumérica; a ideia de uma negatividade, de um momento em que o interface se mostre inoperante enquanto opera. O interface, na obra, é uma espécie de conceito mágico que parece resolver todos os problemas da arte, mas que a sua obra procura, de forma obsessiva, encontrar no seu momento negativo, ou seja, a possibilidade da sua efectivação nula. É sua intenção retirar disponibilidade ao sentido comum quando tematiza o interface e o cria, porque, como já o havia referido Immanuel Kant, este, o sentido comum, é muitas vezes mais uma varinha divinatória (Kant, 1793) que um instrumento sólido para verificar conhecimentos ou operacionalizar conceitos. Tal leva-se a cabo na sua obra. Não pode nunca estar acabada, porque essa é a sua natureza primeira, a sua essência. Ela é, sempre, uma etapa cumprida ou que se cumpre num aqui e num agora determinado, de forma sempre distinta, em concrecência.

A ideia do JCN em desenhar e apresentar um interface nulo, negativo dá resposta à interrogação sobre a sua utilidade, e a resposta é negativa, nada. Mas é o negativo que se precisa, o princípio do processo, a negatividade pura, com dizia Hegel. A sua obra é sempre um princípio do tempo, do devir. Ela surge como uma imagem mediúcnica, como lhe chamou Henri Bergson, ou seja, uma intuição que ele traduzia por aquilo *imagem intermediária*, definindo-a da seguinte forma: «a simplicidade da intuição concreta e a complexidade das abstracções» (Bergson, 1911, p. 3). Terminamos com um *pensamento*

de Blaise Pascal, que acreditamos, marca o argumento que esgrimimos sobre a obra de JCN Escrevia Pascal: «*A natureza do homem não é estar sempre a trabalhar; tem as suas idas e vindas. A febre tem os seus arrepios e os seus ardores; e o frio mostra tão bem a grandeza do ardor da febre como o próprio calor. As invenções dos homens, de século em século, seguem o mesmo caminho. A bondade e a malícia do mundo em geral é a mesma: Plerumque gratae principibus vices*» (Pascal, [1925]/1993, figura 354), ou seja, as mudanças agradam aos príncipes, como as suspensões/desconstruções, completáramos nós.

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Agradecimentos

Os autores agradecem ao CICANT, João Trindade e Pedro Sena Nunes.

Artigo escrito segundo pré-acordo ortográfico de 1990.

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A Questão Étnico-racial nas Diegéticas do Filme *Rio, 40 Graus* e o Dilemma da Censura

The Ethnic-racial Issue in the Diegetics of the Film *Rio, 40 Graus* and the Dilemma of Censorship

doi [10.34623/2184-8661.2025.tell_me.418](https://doi.org/10.34623/2184-8661.2025.tell_me.418)

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Resumo

A questão étnico-racial nas diegéticas do filme *Rio, 40 Graus* e o dilema da censura analisa como a exposição de questões étnico-raciais na narrativa do filme impactou fortemente os agentes censores da época, que descortinavam na tela alva do cinema a negritude das favelas do Rio de Janeiro nos anos 1950. Assim, a censura é apresentada como uma ferramenta do governo para controlar a imagem estética do Brasil, ocultando realidades sociais objetivas como miséria e desigualdade racial. Ao proibir o filme, o Estado buscou evitar a exposição de tensões sociais, mas essa repressão mobilizou críticos e intelectuais em defesa da liberdade de expressão, consolidando um forte movimento da sociedade civil e intelectual pela democratização. O filme em tela, portanto, tornou-se símbolo de resistência e catalisador de debates sobre direitos sociais, raça e classe, desafiando narrativas idealizadas e promovendo uma reflexão sobre a realidade social brasileira.

Artigo recebido em 2025-03-11
Artigo aceite em 2025-06-18
Artigo publicado em 2025-06-30

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Prudente, C. L., & Nascimento, A. L. (2025). A questão étnico-racial nas diegéticas do filme *Rio, 40 Graus* e o dilema da censura. *Rotura – Revista de Comunicação, Cultura e Artes*. https://doi.org/10.34623/2184-8661.2025.tell_me.418

Palavras-chave

Cinema Novo • Censura • Étnico-racial • Rio, 40 Graus

Abstract

The ethnic-racial issue in the diegetics of the film *Rio, 40 Graus* and the dilemma of censorship analyzes how the exposure of ethnic-racial issues in the film's narrative had a strong impact on the censors of the time, who revealed the blackness of Rio de Janeiro's favelas in the 1950s on the white screen of the cinema. Thus, censorship is presented as a government tool to control the aesthetic image of Brazil, hiding objective social realities such as poverty and racial inequality. By banning the film, the State sought to avoid the exposure of social tensions, but this repression mobilized critics and intellectuals in defense of freedom of expression, consolidating a strong civil society movement for democratization. The film on screen, therefore, became a

symbol of resistance and a catalyst for debates on social rights, race, and class, challenging idealized narratives and promoting a reflection on Brazilian social reality.

Keywords

Cinema Novo • Censorship • Ethnic-racial • Rio, 40 Graus

Condições Preliminares

Cinema brasileiro será aquele que reproduzir na tela a vida, as histórias, as lutas, as aspirações, de nossa gente, do litoral ou do interior, no árduo esforço de marchar para o progresso, em meio a todo atraso e a toda a exploração, impostas pelas forças da reação. Cinema brasileiro será aquele que respeitar, ainda que falho inicialmente de técnica e de forma, a verdade e a realidade de nossa vida e de nossos hábitos, sem preocupação maliciosamente evidente de pôr em relevo costumes que não são nossos e cacoetes. (Santos, 2013, citado em Buonicore, 2019, p. 5)

Quando Nelson Pereira dos Santos dirigiu a película *Rio, 40 Graus*, 1955 era um dos mais ativos jovens intelectuais comunistas. Não obstante, Santos afirma, anos depois, que o Partido Comunista do Brasil (PCB) tinha sido contrário à produção do filme, considerado um ato “aventureiro”. Acerca disso, ponderou: “Não queriam que fizesse o filme, diziam que filme popular só depois da revolução. Mas, eu vi que dava [...]. E fui fazer”. Por essa desobediência disciplinar ao PCB, ele considera isso o motivo do porquê foi “rebaixado da Comissão de Cultura do Partido para a célula da Lapa e Santa Teresa” (Salem, 1996, p. 100).

Para Marcos Napolitano (2014), as “patrulhas ideológicas” que sempre marcaram o PCB na área cultural, após 1955 não se pode falar, rigorosamente, em uma política cultural ampla, coerente e orgânica por parte da direção partidária pecebista. Para esse autor, a trajetória da cultura nacional-popular e sobre as proposições estéticas, desenvolvidas por engajados, artistas militantes e intelectuais comunistas estavam além dos estreitos limites do stalinismo, que se lançava às artes pelo “realismo socialista”, cujo princípio básico era simples: a arte e a cultura em geral deveriam estar a serviço dos ideais revolucionários.

O dirigismo partidário pecebista se curvou à potência do filme *Rio, 40 Graus* seja pela sua proposta disruptiva ao realismo socialista, como ao nacionalismo integrador de direita. Para Augusto César Buonicore (2019, s/p):

Estranhamente, se correremos os olhos nos jornais do Partido [PCB] veremos o grande destaque dado ao filme desde os primeiros ensaios realizados em 1954 até o seu lançamento oficial. Como visto anteriormente, a opinião de Nelson parece não corresponder plenamente aos esforços feitos pelos comunistas entre 1945 e 1955 visando o fortalecimento do cinema nacional. Exemplo disso foram os inúmeros filmes, congressos, mesas redondas realizadas; entidades e produtoras criadas e projetos de legislação apresentados em defesa do nosso cinema, como o de Jorge Amado.

O projeto de Nelson Pereira dos Santos trouxe uma discussão da realidade dos empobrecidos, que eram na sua maioria negros de maneira que até então não era



Figura 1. Cartaz da época (Amado, 1955)

comum no cinema de influência hollywoodiana, que tinha como ideal o branco europeu Munanga; Almeida; Prudente (2023). O filme *Rio, 40 graus*, aponta para as realidades da vida popular de grupos empobrecidos como observa a pesquisadora Helena Salem 1987. “Em termos de cinema brasileiro, essa era uma proposta absolutamente subversiva para os anos 1950: mostrar o favelado, o povo de pé no chão, sem preconceito, vivendo seus dramas reais. Falando a língua de seu próprio jeito (com erros gramaticais e gírias)” (Salem, 1996, p. 113). notoriedade do filme se deve a mobilização de um grande número de atores não profissionais, onde o eixo narrativo ocorre em torno de cinco meninos negros vendedores de amendoins. Ao lado disso, cruza-se várias histórias ocorridas no bairro de Copacabana. Dentre as quais temos: partida de futebol; visita de um coronel à cidade do Rio e de um relacionamento amoroso complicado, bem ao estilo das tramas que habitam as praias, morros, estádios e os bares de um domingo ensolarado na cidade do Rio de Janeiro. Assim, um filme que era para se limitar ao aspecto do entretenimento turístico do carnaval, tornou-se político, colocando pontos que contrariavam as narrativas do cinema da ordem estabelecida e, não tardou, por isso, a sofrer com as agruras da censura ao expor contradições sociais e econômicas de uma cidade mitificada.

Conjugando o ficcional com a reportagem documental que é próprio do método cinematográfico vertoviano ao filmar nas ruas Nelson Pereira entendia que os studios do cinema industrial não comportavam a realidade brasileira, que se dava nas ruas e locais emblemáticos, como o Pão de Açúcar, o Corcovado e a favela, conforme foi visto no filme *Referências* (2006). O cineasta usava esses cenários abertos para evidenciar as desigualdades e contrastes do Rio de Janeiro: enquanto os turistas e



Figura 2. Observamos que inserir ponto turístico (*Pão de Açúcar*), constitui-se em desafio técnico ao diretor, que precisou pensar muito em onde colocar a câmera em determinado ângulo, sempre ao ar livre. (Os autores)



Figura 3. Percebemos aqui, revelação da profundidade do deslumbramento de garotos negros empobrecidos contemplando uma atração pública, porém voltada para trás. (Os autores)

a classe média desfrutavam de uma cidade idealizada. Nesse sentido, a diegética acontece dentro da ação narrativa ficcional por parte das autoridades governamentais que ignoravam os moradores da favela cujas vozes eram pouco ouvidas e, por isso, precisavam cotidianamente legitimar seu espaço e sua identidade.

Outro ponto importante é a crítica explícita à violência policial e à repressão sofrida, sobretudo, aos afrodescendentes subalternizados e ou invisibilizados nas sombras da cidade. Em uma das cenas mais icônicas, um jovem é perseguido e agredido pela polícia, simplesmente por sua presença nos espaços turísticos da cidade. Nesse aspecto, constatamos a força imagética mobilizada pelo cinema para explicitar o racismo e a discriminação social como amálgama da sociedade brasileira.

Entender a lógica imediata e subjacente do diretor Nelson Ferreira dos Santos é fundamental para a compreensão da origem cinematográfica brasileira no que passou a ser denominado de Cinema Novo, que se destacou nos anos 1960 e 1970 por criticar a desigualdade social e a instabilidade racial e classista do país. Ao inserir a pauta estética, político-social e racial, essas novas e potentes abordagens levadas a efeito por jovens cineastas do pós-guerra ajudaram a definir uma identidade do cinema de contorno nacionalista, porém, crítica e socialmente engajada às problemáticas brasileira, em contraponto aos padrões de filmografias comerciais e estrangeiras, sobretudo, estadunidenses.

Na condição de cineasta Santos foi também um pensador, considerando que para Deleuze (1990), o cineasta se assemelha mais ao filósofo, do que dos artistas. Nelson Pereira teve, portanto, um papel crucial de ideólogo com suas realizações cinematográficas, na consolidação do Cinema Novo, que trazia postura crítica e reflexiva.

Durante seu processo de amadurecimento intelectual, obras como *Rio, 40 Graus* revela as marcas e influências da *nouvelle vague* francesa e do neorealismo italiano, em particular na tomada de decisão de realizar filmagem em locações reais e com o uso de atores não profissionais, o que confere à realização um caráter documental. Outro aspecto importante dessa abordagem à italiana é a construção estética a partir da improvisação da linguagem espontânea e natural até para expressar o impacto das injustiças sociais e das condições de vida das classes populares.

Na realidade brasileira, essa direção cinematográfica, tornou-se um divisor de águas na realização de filmes. O foco nas personagens da favela não era visto como digno e positivo para o cinema comercial, acostumado em trabalhar personagens empobrecidos e negros de forma caricatas e estereotipadas. Portanto, a ousadia de Santos ao colocar “luz, câmera e ação” para focar no povo brasileiro. Isso foi uma postura cultural que chamou atenção dos seguimentos, dominantes, que se colocaram em um contexto de resistência reacionária contra o cinema inovador, com base na cultura popular, que caracterizava uma estética revolucionária, colocando o negro empobrecido e sua cultura como referência estética.

No complexo contexto político dos anos de 1950 quando uma realização cinematográfica mostra a pobreza e a perversa invisibilidade social dos afrodescendentes no seio da capital do Brasil, isso fez com que, os setores mais conservadores logo se manifestassem, por meio da força estabelecida, que detém na administração pública o poder da segurança, onde se encontrava o setor de censura, usado contra a produção cultural contrária aos grupos dominantes.

O filme, inicialmente intitulado *Cidade Maravilhosa*, teria como tema central o carnaval. No entanto, após um contato mais próximo com a dura realidade das favelas cariocas, Nelson Pereira dos Santos optou por uma abordagem crítica e reflexiva, revelando as condições sociais precárias que existiam além dos bairros nobres e dos pontos turísticos do Rio de Janeiro. Essa decisão transformou *Rio, 40 Graus* no epicentro de debates e disputas em um Brasil que emergia do período pós-ditadura de Getúlio Vargas. Enquanto os censores viam no filme uma fonte perigosa de ideias subversivas, chegando ao ponto de alegar, que os termômetros do Rio de Janeiro nunca registravam 40 graus, demonstrando que a ideia enredo do filme foi exagerada, colocando em risco a indústria do turismo. Essa censura teve seu fim, com a liberação do filme para exibição em 1956, com a eleição de Juscelino Kubitschek.

Ainda sobre o processo de censura, vale a pena destacar que o coronel Geraldo de Menezes Cortes, chefe do Departamento Federal de Segurança Pública, responsável pela proibição da película em todo território nacional, afirmava que o *Rio, 40 Graus* era uma obra comunista financiada e apoiada com o chamado “ouro de Moscou”. Segundo Buonicore (2019, s/p):

O filme só apresenta os aspectos negativos da capital brasileira e foi feito com tal habilidade que só serve aos interesses políticos do extinto PCB, disse o coronel. A distorção comunista começava pelo título, pois nunca havia feito 40 graus no Rio. A película também não mostrava ninguém trabalhando, a não ser os meninos vendedores de amendoim. Não adiantou explicar-lhe que a história se passava num único domingo ensolarado.

Esse episódio prosaico é revelador do clímax político em curso nos anos que seguiam a chamada Guerra Fria que marcou os anos do pós Segunda Guerra Mundial, 1945. Nesse panorama internacional, o Brasil se convertia numa espécie de experimento democrático que lutava para reconstituir sua cultura cinematográfica, que infelizmente era de baixa qualidade nos conteúdos, que se resumiam a comédias e melodrama em geral influenciados pela indústria hollywoodiana, que privilegiava o homem branco europeu em detrimento dos outros seguimentos raciais.

Logo, quando o filme *Rio, 40 Graus* é lançado, notoriamente sob forte influência do neorealismo do Rossellini e inspirações nos cineclubes militantes, a proposta cinematográfica de Nelson elevou o cinema brasileiro para uma narrativa com uma estética mais crítica e reflexiva. De tal sorte que marcou, a identidade do cinema nacional, com os poderosos recursos de coloquialidade nas atuações de pessoas no cotidiano; articulado com tomadas de cenas fora de ambientes controlados de estúdio; e, mesmo com roteiros burocráticos e rígidos.



Figura 4. Destacamos uma cena de uma favela inocente e romântica, onde crianças negras se juntam para comprar uma bola de futebol e ajudar os familiares. (Os autores)

Nesse aspecto, Juliana Sangion, destaca que os planos e sequências do filme foram:

organizados, numa narrativa não-linear, seja talvez o grande mérito de *Rio, 40 Graus*, que sugere que a própria realidade não é homogênea, mas fragmentada e descontínua e daí nasce o espanto do espectador diante dela (Sangion, 2005, p. 4).

É importante destacar que o sentimento de vanguarda italiano, caracterizado no neorealismo marcou a origem do cinema novo, com a realização de *Rio, 40 graus*, de Nelson Pereira. Assim podemos afirmar que o tratamento de cena com base na rua em detrimento aos studio foi uma expressão estética do neorealismo, que se tornou estrutural no comportamento cênico do cinema novo. Embora o gênio criador do filme se manifestasse nos estreitos limites financeiros, a produção cinematográfica suplantava as agruras com muita criatividade e ousadia que, assim, descortinava uma cidade repleta de tensões e contradições sociais num único dia de domingo ensolarado de praias lotadas, partida de futebol agitada e, sobretudo, o duro labor de crianças negras do morro e lugares empobrecidos a vender amendoim para suprir seus desejos e necessidades. É nesse cenário que os dramas e as tragédias se sucedem e tomam forma na cinematografia. Nessa linha de compreensão percebemos a influência do neorealismo italiano em *Rio, 40 graus*. Nesse filme de Nelson Pereira dos Santos, realismo e realidade se fundem. Podemos pensar no filme como proposta de uma tomada de posição coletiva, mais do que saídas individuais.

Glauber Rocha entendeu o *Rio, 40 Graus* como parte do realismo carioca, pensado também por outros autores do cinema novismo, como Alex Viany (1965), que percebeu nesse realismo uma forma de se contar a história, agregando elementos regionais, que dialogam com a ambiência fílmica que faz a diferença na narrativa,

considerando que a narrativa é elemento substancial da linguagem cinematográfica. Como observa Jean-Claude Bernardet:

[...] o cinema apto a contar histórias; outras opções teriam sido possíveis, de forma que o cinema desenvolvesse uma linguagem científica ou ensaística, mas foi a linguagem da ficção que predominou. Os passos fundamentais para elaboração dessa linguagem foram a criação de estruturas narrativas e a relação com o espaço, (Bernardet, 1985, p. 33).

A direção de *Rio, 40 Graus* pavimentou as bases do movimento do Cinema Novo ao revelar uma filmografia pioneira com foco na realidade nua e crua do povo brasileiro, onde o negro e a sua cultura têm evidente significação, sendo elemento fundamental da sintaxe da tendência cinemanovista, Gerber (1977), Prudente (1995). Nesse sentido, o cineasta Glauber Rocha, observou nessa realização o primeiro filme do cinema novo, trazendo por essência o comportamento revolucionário: “O primeiro filme revolucionário do 3º Mundo antes da Revolução Cubana” (Buonicore, 2019, s/p).

Ismail Xavier (2001) aponta o início do cinema moderno nacional com Nelson Pereira dos Santos nos anos 1950, quando realiza seus primeiros filmes, *Rio, 40 Graus* e *Rio, Zona Norte*. Assim, entre meados da década de 50 e os anos 1970 que o nosso cinema, efetivamente, produziu um cinema autoral militante, com filmes de baixo orçamento e a renovação da linguagem e narrativas, traços que marcam o cinema moderno, por oposição ao clássico e mais plenamente industrial.

O Processo de Censura do Filme *Rio, 40 Graus*

A censura ao filme *Rio 40 Graus* evidencia o uso do aparato jurídico e político para moldar e restringir narrativas que abordam problemas sociais no Brasil dos anos 1950. A justificativa de “difamação da imagem da cidade” revela uma preocupação do governo em proteger a imagem mítica do Rio de Janeiro, capital do país à época, e consolidar um roteiro turístico idealizado para o mundo. Essa tentativa de ocultar ou suavizar as desigualdades e dificuldades da vida urbana nas favelas expõe a postura oficial de minimizar questões como a pobreza e a violência, em detrimento da liberdade artística e do debate público sobre a realidade brasileira. O uso de uma moral justificativa para desqualificar a representação da vida dos moradores de lugares empobrecidos demonstrava o conservadorismo da época, que se opõe a uma abordagem mais realista e crítica dos problemas sociais, impactados com a questão racial, considerando que na sociedade brasileira raça e classe se confundem, Ianni (1972).

As práticas de censura acompanharam a produção artística desde o período colonial, passando pela monarquia e pela república e desafiam a produção atual com formas privadas e difusas de coerção. Assim, a proximidade entre arte, política e poder, aponta para novos desafios que envolvem o estudo da censura na sociedade contemporânea, suas novas e complexas formas de atuação. Nessa perspectiva, Maria Cristina Castilho Costa (2014, p. 5), observa que:

[...] a censura nasceu da interdição a palavras, gestos, comportamentos e imagens e ganhou maior repercussão na proibição do escrito em razão da maior perenidade dos documentos escritos frente à efemeridade das demais manifestações simbólicas. Não é à toa que a invenção da fotografia e, depois, do cinema, no século XIX, modificou esse regime das artes, tornando igualmente perigosas as imagens registradas e reproduzidas. Assim, ao falarmos em censura estaremos fazendo menção a uma longa história de controle da cultura por forças hegemônicas e, portanto, a uma ação política e de dominação que envolve essa partilha do sensível própria da Modernidade.

A censura foi uma ferramenta para controlar produções que questionavam a ordem estabelecida, mantendo a narrativa de progresso positivista e estabilidade que o governo tentava projetar em favor do mitológico urbano industrialismo branco europeu, ainda que essa realidade fosse distante do cotidiano de grande parte da população, que na sua maioria era rural, negra, miscigenada e empobrecida. Dessa forma, a censura ao filme *Rio, 40 Graus* reflete um conflito entre o direito à expressão artística e o interesse político em preservar uma imagem estatal idealizada. Miliandre Garcia (2009, p. 3), ao analisar a censura de costumes no Brasil, destaca que:

Em meados dos anos 1940, com a pressão dos movimentos sociais, o esvaziamento do Estado Novo e a deposição de Getúlio Vargas, o sucessor presidencial efetuou mudanças na esfera da censura com o objetivo principal de dissociar a prática da censura do governo anterior sem, contudo, cogitar a extinção do mecanismo da Constituição brasileira. No contexto democrático, a criação do Serviço de Censura de Diversões Públicas (SCDP), além de responder pela censura prévia de diversões públicas, buscava também legitimar a existência da censura no campo da moral.

Destacamos que a temática da censura nas artes, especialmente no cinema, é relevante para os estudos acadêmicos, pois envolve questões fundamentais acerca da: liberdade de expressão, poder, identidade cultural, ética e política. A censura na realização cinematográfica reflete-se entre criadores e instituições que tentam regular ou controlar a cultura e a narrativa histórica, e estudar essas características é crucial para entender como as

sociedades lidam com ideias e ideais. Portanto, faremos uma abordagem preliminar como objetivo circunstancial de lançar luz ao *modus operandi* de forças obscurantistas que sufocaram as artes e o livre expressar.

A rigor, a censura cinematográfica toca diretamente na questão da liberdade de expressão, uma temática central em disciplinas como direito, sociologia, filosofia e ciência política. Ao estudar os mecanismos de censura no filme *Rio, 40 Graus* e seus desdobramentos nos permite entender melhor como diferentes regimes políticos, democráticos ou autoritários, limitam ou permitem a expressão artística, revelando os limites do poder do Estado e outras instituições sobre a produção cultural. Nessa perspectiva, analisar casos de censura no cinema permite examinar até onde os governos, grupos religiosos ou outros agentes sociais interferem na liberdade criativa e quais são as justificativas e implicações para o desenvolvimento cultural.

Jorge Amado, intitulado O caso de “Rio 40 Graus”, que foi publicado no histórico jornal *Imprensa Popular*, de tendência comunista, em que o autor conclamava todos a lutarem contra “o terror e o obscurantismo”. Isso era feito em luta e defesa enfática pelas liberdades assim se pronunciou sobre o episódio da censura do filme *Rio, 40 Graus*: “precisa ser exibido. Porque é um bom filme, obra de talento e sensibilidade, honesto, brasileiro, patriótico, e porque, ao proibi-lo, estão os homens do golpe iniciando sua luta frontal contra a intelectualidade”, (*Imprensa Popular*, 1955, p. 4); assim escreveu Jorge Amado, o escritor mais representativo entre os autores comunista da época.

Aspectos da Censura no Brasil

A censura às realizações cinematográficas no Brasil foi formalizada e intensificada ao longo do século XX, fundamentada em diferentes bases legais que legitimaram o controle estatal sobre o conteúdo audiovisual. Entre as principais normas e leis que estabeleceram a censura cinematográfica, destacam-se, a saber: no Código Penal de 1940. Muito embora não fosse direcionado especificamente ao cinema, o Código Penal brasileiro incluía artigos que proibiam “ofensas à moral e aos bons costumes”, usados pelas autoridades para restringir conteúdos, que eles consideravam impróprios para o público. Esse dispositivo foi amplamente interpretado e aplicado para censurar temas relacionados à sexualidade, violência e críticas sociais. Garcia (2009, p. 11), pondera que após um intervalo de seis anos, de 1939 a 1945,

[...] o exercício da censura restaurou a “tradição policialesca” e a criação do SCDP separou a censura de diversões públicas da censura da imprensa sem, contudo, apresentar rupturas drásticas com a estrutura anterior ou mudanças profundas no sistema



Figura 5. Foco em garoto vendendo amendoim.

censório. Convém registrar que, desde a criação do serviço de censura, em meados da década de 1940 até o final do ano de 1967, a censura de diversões públicas permaneceu sob a ingerência do chefe de polícia e atuou de forma autônoma nos estados.

O Departamento de Censura de Diversões Públicas (DCDP), ligado ao Ministério da Justiça, era responsável pela avaliação prévia e censura de filmes, peças de teatro, programas de rádio e outras formas de entretenimento, sob a justificativa de “preservar a ordem pública e os bons costumes”. Assim, para tal moral conservadora, temas como pobreza, violência, sexualidade e crítica ao poder são considerados ameaçadores, pois expõem aspectos da realidade que o governo e as classes dominantes preferiam não ver divulgados no espaço público. Por meio dessas bases legais empregadas para controlar o conteúdo exibido ao público, limitando a liberdade de expressão e suprimindo temas críticos ao governo ou à moral conservadora que fundamentou sobremaneira a ação de censura do filme *Rio, 40 Graus*. A censura, nesse caso, não atuou apenas para “proteger” o público de conteúdos “inapropriados”, como alegava o discurso oficial, mas para consolidar uma visão de mundo que reforçava os valores tradicionais e mantinha o status quo dos seguimentos privilegiados eurocaucasianos.

O DCDP, em termos burocrático e institucional era revestido de pleno poder para: proibir, exigir cortes, ou até mesmo impedir a distribuição de filmes que fossem considerados importantes à ordem pública, aos bons costumes, ou à segurança nacional. Embora o Decreto-Lei de 1946 não especificasse diretamente uma proibição ao conteúdo social, racial ou crítico, ele conferia ao Estado uma ampla margem de interpretação para censurar temas que poderiam gerar desconforto ou críticas à ordem social e à política vigente.

No Decreto nº 20.493, de 24 de janeiro de 1946 que aprovou o “Regulamento do Serviço de Censura

de Diversões Públicas do Departamento Federal de Segurança Pública” destaca assim os termos de censura prévias, nas quais as projeções cinematográficas encabeçavam a lista do DCDP. De fato, as projeções cinematográficas ocupam o primeiro lugar na lista, o que indicava objetivamente que o cinema era uma das formas de expressão cultural mais vigiadas e controladas pelos censores. Esse foco centrado reflete a percepção das autoridades da época de que essa mídia tinha um grande alcance e um poder persuasivo significativo, capaz de influenciar e mobilizar as massas de forma rápida e eficaz. Diferente de outras artes, como a literatura ou o teatro, que ainda possuíam um alcance mais restrito, o cinema já era, em 1946, um meio de comunicação de massa que atraía um grande número de espectadores, atravessando diferentes classes sociais, faixas etárias e regiões do país.

O cinema é uma das formas de arte mais acessíveis e populares, com um impacto visual e emocional imediato sobre o público, sobretudo, numa época em que a televisão ainda não havia se popularizado e outros meios de comunicação de massa eram limitados, o cinema se tornou em uma das principais fontes de entretenimento e informação para a população. As autoridades brasileiras do período pós-Estado Novo compreenderam que a experiência cinematográfica, ao envolver os sentidos e o imaginário do público, poderia facilmente moldar opiniões, comportamentos e até questionar as estruturas sociais vigentes. Dessa forma, censurar o conteúdo cinematográfico foi visto como uma maneira de preservar o controle sobre a formação de valores e opiniões, além de garantir que a imagem do país estivesse em sintonia com os ideais do governo.

Vale destacar que a censura, oficial, no caso do filme em tela, paradoxalmente, foi a maior impulsionadora para o filme, especialmente ao colocá-lo no centro do debate intelectual e político brasileiro. Por outro lado, o impedimento de sua exibição, sob a justificativa de que ele mostrava um Brasil negro e de cultura negra. Esse comportamento contrariava o mito da democracia racial, cujo grupos dirigentes e privilegiados eram brancos de ideal europeu. Dessa maneira ao expor as favelas e as condições de vida da população pobre, gerou uma repercussão significativa entre críticos, cineastas e intelectualidade que enxergavam no filme uma representação autêntica da realidade brasileira. Assim, a censura oficial, ao tentar silenciar uma visão crítica e realista do país, acabou chamando ainda mais atenção para o filme e para os problemas que ele abordava. Portanto, com o filme *Rio, 40 Graus* podemos entendê-lo ainda hoje como um símbolo da luta contra a repressão e em defesa de uma expressão artística comprometida com as liberdades democráticas e a luta antirracista.

Conclusão

Ao abordar questões sociais como a pobreza, a desigualdade e a vida nas favelas cariocas, o filme *Rio, 40 Graus*, colocou em xeque linguagens, narrativas e o padrão estético eurocêntrico que frequentemente ignorava subalternizados que eram vítimas da tentativa da invisibilidade racial. A censura oficial, que proibiu a exibição do filme, acabou por gerar um intenso debate com público em geral e com a intelectualidade em particular. Embora a tônica dos debates girasse em torno da liberdade de expressão artística; a pauta da discriminação racial no cinema brasileiro irrompeu de forma e maneira insofismável, considerando que o negro é concebido nos anos 1950 como uma ameaça à ordem vigente, na medida em que estabelecia uma cultura alternativa, que se dava fora do comércio capitalista.

Cumprir destacar ainda que a canção intitulada: *Voz do Morro*, de Zé Keti, com interpretação do cantor Jorge Goulart, que se constituiu música tema do filme “*Rio, 40 Graus*” não é apenas um elemento de fundo, mas uma parte integral da narrativa que enriquece a experiência cinematográfica, reforçando a mensagem social e cultural do filme em que os negros do morro construíram uma sociedade alternativa da ontologia da alegria dialética, contrariando a sociedade branca do asfalto limitada a lógica acumulativa do capitalismo comercial da época.

Segundo Ismail Xavier (2001), o cinema brasileiro moderno, acertou o passo do país com os movimentos de ponta de seu tempo. Foi um produto de cinéfilos, jovens críticos e intelectuais que, ao conduzirem essa atualização estética, alteraram substancialmente o estatuto do cineasta no interior da cultura brasileira, promovendo um diálogo mais fundo com a tradição literária e com os movimentos que marcaram a música popular e o teatro naquele momento.

Assim, estamos concluindo como a realização de Nelson Pereira, que com a música *A voz do Morro*, composta por Zé Keti em 1954, trilha sonora do filme em questão foi fundamental para tencionar a narrativa utópica, que projetava para um outro mundo além da hegemonia eurocêntrica tomada pelo valor de troca, da lógica acumulativa. Segreto (2012):

Eu sou o samba / A voz do morro sou eu mesmo sim senhor / Quero mostrar ao mundo que tenho valor / Eu sou o rei do terreiro / Eu sou o samba / Sou natural daqui do Rio de Janeiro / Sou eu quem levo a alegria / Para milhões de corações brasileiros / Salve o samba, queremos samba / Quem está pedindo é a voz do povo de um país / Salve o samba, queremos samba.

Finalmente, destacamos que a música *A voz do Morro* inicia narrativa *Rio, 40 Graus* em primeiro plano, que destacam uma vista aérea do Rio de Janeiro, enfatizando as belezas naturais da cidade, ao som, não diegético.

Todavia, é no término do filme que a música de Zé Kéti é retomada com toda força e energia nas vozes das escolas de samba Portelas e Unidos do Cabuçu e os integrantes da comunidade em festa, quase em uníssono metadieético para demonstrar como “a imagem e o som veiculam duas narrativas fortemente imbricadas” (Gaudreault; Jost, 2009, p. 43). Neste contexto, concluímos que o termo

“diegético” está referenciando o mundo de narrativas do filme, ou seja, tudo que é parte da história e do universo apresentado na obra. Isso inclui personagens, eventos, diálogos e, nesse caso, as representações culturais e sociais que são afetadas pela censura, especialmente em relação a temas sensíveis ou controversos, como a miséria, a desigualdade e a questão racial do negro.

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