The ethnographic film as a way of thinking:

responsibilities of the encounter with the other

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract:
This paper addresses the ethical encounter between the filmmaker/researcher and the subject in the scope of ethnographic film, reinforcing its importance as an artistic and scientific field capable of dealing with places and people in situations of identity and social risk. The basis for the discussion is the research project Island City (Roberti 2020), which studied and documented deeply embedded and socioeconomically fragile urban communities in the city of Porto, Portugal, where major changes (commercial, touristic, political) were taking place in recent years, affecting those communities. We approach the valuing of the *right here and right now* of fieldwork as a fundamental element in this relationship between the self and the *other*, where we can understand the *truth* of the reality portrayed, Jean Rouch's *cinematographic ballet*, and where it is fundamental to distinguish what should and should not be filmed.

Keywords:
Ethnographic documentary; Cine trance; Island city; Immersive fieldwork; Scientific subjectivity.

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Introduction: The ethnographic film and the Island City

"To be able to distil and identify the essential variables of experience is the essence of the artist's craft" (Hall 1966: 75).

By acknowledging that ethnographic film is, or can also be, scientific, we assume that there is an intrinsic relationship between artistic concerns, expressed through the act of filming and producing imagery and sound material, and the reflection before and over these moments. Subjectivity and science act concomitantly in this process, in an interdependent and complementary way (MacDougall 1999). The filmmaker/researcher of this type of documentary highlights and interprets the fundamental variants of an experience that is essentially sensitive and sensory (Hall 1966).

The recognition of the existence of this relationship, even in the documentary field itself, is not new. As emphasised by Jay Ruby in 'Is an Ethnographic Film a Filmic Ethnography?' (1975), we believe that to insist on the existence of an "inherent conflict" between art and science in visual anthropology will be not only redundant but also unhelpful and eventually meaningless (Ruby 1975: 105). Moreover, we want to reflect on how this process of coexistence develops from a specific theoretical-practical research context, making it a very close and particular relationship, i.e., a sensitive relationship.

Our reflection departs from a research project entitled 'The Island City' (Roberti 2020), developed between 2015 and 2020 in Porto, the second Portuguese city. Aiming to approach deeply embedded communities, historically stigmatised, facing the direct effects of major transformations in the city, we searched for alternatives to the authorial and ethnographic documentary. The communities selected for the study were undergoing profound transformations, driven by a city's new political, economic and social dynamics in tourist, commercial, and architectural effervescence (Antunes 2019).

After years of facing problems related to urban decay, Porto has started to undergo dramatic changes, especially driven by the Portuguese tourist boom of the last decade — the city was elected 'the best European destination' for tourism several times[1]. The price of houses in the historic city centre, previously abandoned and unattractive to the middle-upper classes — and even viewed with some contempt by them — skyrocketed. Some communities who had been living there for generations started facing compulsory residency displacement or were just evicted from their homes. "The intensity, the character and the speed of change make Porto a relevant case to understand the contemporary processes of fast-paced gentrification and urban change in newly attractive, medium-sized European heritage cities." (Fernandes et al. 2018: 179).

One core issue of the case studies of this project is that the residents had little or no control over the changes occurring in the place where they lived. The research observed how these populations underwent those processes, which implied huge transformations in their personal and collective lives. Our

1 Porto elected the Europe's Leading City Destination 2022: https://www.porto.pt/en/news/porto-elected-the-europes-leading-city-destination-2022

approach aimed at addressing their own perspective, which means the views of those who were the most affected — for better or worse — by the external changes.

In this sense, we developed the concept of *island city* to refer to spaces – residential areas – in the city that perform a separate microcosm, i.e., with their own way of life, different from their geographic environment. They look like cities that exist within the city.

The documentary was, thus, the theoretical-practical basis for the critical reflection developed in the study of these *islands.* It was the main instrument to approach the subject, and the camera functioned as a dual ethnographic tool: it continuously built the confidence between the I, the documentary researcher, and the *other,* on the other side of the camera, and its very action was a way of reflecting on the island city (Roberti 2019)[2].

For Ruby, the ethnographic film should be considered film ethnography, i.e., not being treated as a mere tool of other disciplines — an instrumental, secondary technique — but as a practice, a form of ethnographic knowledge *per se*, and '(...) we must assume that when a filmmaker says that his film is ethnographic, he wishes to be taken seriously' (Ruby 1975: 105). To illustrate this argument, the author uses the distinction made by Jean-Luc Godard between *films about the revolution* and *revolutionary films*, the second option being the one stressed by Ruby. In the same sense, to be considered as such, the ethnographic film must therefore comply with rules proper to the scientific domain, just like written ethnography — in an adapted form, of course (MacDougall 2022). In this regard, "an ethnographic work must contain statements which reveal the methodology of the author", how he collects, analyses and organises the data, and very importantly, "ethnographers must be able to defend their methodological decisions on the basis of their scientific logic" (Ruby 1975: 107).

In this sense, understanding the ethnographic film as a significant domain within anthropology helps to highlight its scientific character and clarifies some important issues, as Paul Henley underlines:

Both anthropologists and observational filmmakers vary in the relative importance they give to participation on the one hand and observation on the other. But whatever the exact mix, there is a common belief that understanding should be achieved through a gradual process of discovery, that is, through engagement with the everyday lives of the subjects rather than by placing them within predetermined matrices, whether a script in the case of the filmmakers or a questionnaire in the case of anthropologists. (Henley 2000: 218)

In the case of this research, although it cannot be classified as a purely anthropological work — as it starts, on the other hand, from an artistic strand — this project benefits from many concepts and ideas of this field. Having deeply embedded populations as the subject of study and working with participant and non-participant observation, in a gradual and cautious ethnographic immersion with them, make this approach not only evident but necessary (Pink et al 2022, Pink 2020).

One of the examples that contributes to this reflection is anthropological documentary filmmaker Catarina Alves Costa (2021), who not only seeks out and attests to the existence of this type of cinema in the Portuguese context – where this project took place -, bringing to light new reflections on the work of directors such as António Campos, but also contributes to opening up new paths in this direction, namely in the uses of the popular in scientific and artistic production. More particularly in the case of Campos and the portrait of a rural environment, or the story of the construction of the dam that submerges a village (1971), Costa talks about the intention to "return the gestures of the people with ethnographic precision," a cinema that "will be taken as a testimony of a certain country" (Costa 2022: 86). More than that, the emphasis on portraying the relationship between a man or a community and the place in where they live — or used to live but have had to leave —, in a broader and deeper sense, is of particular interest to this project.

2 Audiovisual teaser of the project, including the three case studies. Available at: https://vimeo.com/333226899/4b6c39189f

Just like the documentary domain itself, working with ethnographic film implies understanding it as a *porous* field, with characteristics and limitations that vary according to the temporal and the thematic context (Nichols 2001; Önen 2021). This does not necessarily interfere with its scientific component, and makes it, on the other hand, more complex and delicate. To delve into this field in a practical way, through its inevitable fieldwork — the heart of the filmic processes described in this paper —, also means assuming a certain degree of personal and professional vulnerability, by the *reality* of the subject (people), much more than by the wishes, or rules, of the author, as described by Henley.

In *Island City*, we worked with live processes: they were happening, so ongoing, eventually latent, and mostly unpredictable. Following the residents' perspective required delicate dialogues, under a patient and low-invasive approach. Our attention was focused on the apparently small daily nuances of these people, which sometimes turned out to be big changes, inserted in large contexts, diluted, unnoticed.

Documenting these vulnerable communities, in the unpredictable context in which they found themselves, was a long and demanding process that made us increasingly focus on the action of the fieldwork. Both Ruby and Henley point to a capacity of the ethnographic film that is, in this sense, fundamental to our work: to demonstrate, in a more explicit and authentic way, the experience of the encounter between the I, the ethnographer/filmmaker, and the *other* (Henley 2000: 213), which goes far beyond what we classify as subject — defined by the observer and external to the *observed*. The *other* refers here to the process itself, the lives of people, spaces, and cultures involved. Our intention was to follow the development of moments of negotiation and complicity, the reactions to the presence of the camera, and to understand, in a gradually more assertive way — as we went deeper into the fieldwork and got closer to the characters and their life stories — the importance of the decision to not film in certain situations. To deal with this complexity, we assume the subjective and, at the same time, scientific dynamics of ethnographic film, between advances and retreats in fieldwork.

Thus, subjectivity is a necessary element to reach ethics in the field of documentaries — ethnographic documentaries in particular. In order to clarify and implement this argument, concepts such as the *lucid trance* and the *thinking with the camera* will be developed in this paper, giving sense to the permanent spiral of practice and reflection, i.e., reflection while practising in fieldwork. This is a style of work that assumes that the act of filming is a singular way of relating with the subject.

Lucid trance: subjectivity and ethics in the encounter

We recognize subjectivity as an issue that is not only theoretical, but that the author herself had to internalize, assume, and address it. In *Island City*, the camera is not a mere instrument or recording technique, nor are its results. All these elements are part of a process, of a *way of thinking*. It is a particular, and therefore subjective, way of exercising and organizing the study and the theoretical reflection while building a relationship with the real subject.

It is about thinking while walking with the camera in our hands and understanding what we should and, especially, what we should not film. To better understand this aspect of the work, it is important to emphasize that the documentary style developed in this project does not rely on a film crew. Thus, the researcher directs, shoots, and edits all the pieces produced.

This *way of thinking*, developed with the camera on the scene, has been described in different ways by influential filmmakers and authors in the field of documentary filmmaking. Among them: Dziga Vertov and the *cine-eye* (Hicks 2007), recognizing the camera as an extension of the human body itself and

the film as a vehicle for the expression of its author's sensibility; Jean Rouch and the *cine-trance* of his *cinematic ballet* (Rouch and Feld 2003; Expósito Martín 2020); and David MacDougall, who defines this relationship with images as a *different way of knowing*: 'we are putting ourselves in a sensory state that is at once one of vacancy and of heightened awareness. (...) We learn to inhabit what we see'. (MacDougall 2006: 7)

Enrica Colusso, a director who also chooses to film her works, relates these authors in an article about her film ABC Colombia (Colusso 2017), and speaks of this process as a receptive state, a *lucid trance*, "during which one tunes in to the slightest movements of the other's body (mimesis) and listens to its faintest inflections, intentions and expressions with a highlighted focus and a concentration uncommon to daily encounters (Colusso 2017: 142).

This is the main reason for our option to direct and film at the same time so that it is possible to experience this *state* on the field. This is when the researcher/filmmaker gets to know — or tries to get to know — the reality in question, but it is also when the *other* meets the documentary filmmaker.

The very literacy of the term *lucid trance* contains the balance upon which it is ideally possible to work. It is a way of performing, that intends to leave the artistic and subjective components free to act, but always guided by a deeply reflective attitude. The trance provoked by the action of the camera in front of the characters and events requires lucid sensibility to understand what to do: where to point the camera; how to move around; how close to get; and in this case in which the camera is controlled by the ethnographer/filmmaker, how to react and respond to the interaction with the people on *the other side* of the lens. Thus, we are faced with Jean Rouch's cinematic ballet:

For me then, the only way to film is to walk with the camera, taking it where it is most effective and improvising another type of ballet with it, trying to make it as alive as the people it is filming. I consider this dynamic improvisation to be a first synthesis of Vertov's ciné-eye and Flaherty's participating camera. (Rouch and Feld 2003: 38)

In Island City, we can consider that the lucidity of this ballet is also based on non-filming moments: the decision not to film, not to capture audio, or not to photograph certain moments of the fieldwork, even though they might be potentially relevant to the film, or emotionally appealing. What allows this kind of decision to be made is the proximity to the subject. For this reason, in the first approaches, the inhabitants of the spaces studied in this project were not recorded through image and/or sound. With a patient presence in the field, we realized that the *other* in these *island cities* is, in reality, a diversity of *others*. Each community studied has its own particularities and *cohesion*, which exists even when the reality is one of social disintegration, as in the case, for example, of the residents of the city council's social housing (Drago 2017).

The residents, coming from different origins and for different reasons, despite not being able to choose where they go, in which house or region they will live — these are issues determined by public agencies responsible for social housing — are able to develop their own social interaction in these spaces, of conviviality, of belonging: they create their own *islands*.

After getting to know better, in person, the collective dynamics of the populations in question, it began to be possible to make this discernment and move on to the next phase. This corresponds to a more singular approach to each resident. From this exercise, gradual and cautious, we established a relationship of trust and intimacy with these places and people, making it possible to control the *trance-cinematography* in a fairer and more honest way for the characters involved, as described by Henley:

In the course of a prolonged period of research, the ethnographer may well decide only to use his or her camera during certain restricted periods and for certain very specific purposes which lend themselves particularly well to a filmic treatment. (Henley 2000: 220)

As Henley emphasizes, long-term immersive research makes the decision about what to film, or not to film, progressively more assertive (figures 1 and 2). However, *thinking with the camera* or while filming provokes two contradictory effects. The ethnographer/filmmaker will be able to produce a more honest and faithful record of the encounter with the *other*, the effects of this interaction and the action of the characters at decisive moments, but will also be more exposed and susceptible to error. To illustrate this type of situation, Henley compares film ethnography to written ethnography, bearing in mind that filmmaking is, in general, a much more intrusive activity in the field than other forms of anthropological research. The author exemplifies this by arguing that in these other forms of research, the researcher takes notes and then reflects and decides what to do with them, while on the other hand, the filmmaker needs to negotiate in a more specific way while the fieldwork is taking place, the details and implications of his/her activity. "As a result, the nexus of relationships through which a representation is engendered tends to be more evident in a film than in a written text, particularly in the case of a film shot in an observational style." (Henley 2000: 215).

Figure 1 First filmed meeting of the Tapada Residents' Association. By Ana Clara Roberti

Figure 2 Filming of individual interviews with Tapada residents inside their homes, after the director got closer to them and the neighbourhood. By Ana Clara Roberti

One example that illustrates this is in the video Para-raios[3] (Roberti 2017), produced in a neighbourhood in the city of Porto, Ilha da Bela Vista. In this case study, the residents, almost all elderly and born in this community, were going through a deep rehabilitation process, proposed by the City Council, which included demolishing their houses to build new ones. This short documentary focuses on the day they moved into the new rehabilitated houses, and shows the director's encounter with them and their anxiety and curiosity to understand what the neighbourhood and housing would be like from that moment on. Under this atmosphere of excitement and novelty, the camera is always in the hands, never on the tripod. It travels through the scenery walking among the master builders to go see the new houses, invited by the resident ladies.

The camera movement in this video represents the environment experienced by the filmmaker. At some point, we hear one of the residents asking, 'Do you want to come see my house?' (figure 3). The next shot follows her into the house at her pace and accompanies her first *little* dilemma: fitting the key into the new lock — smaller than the previous one — with trembling hands. Inside the houses, the dialogue was sometimes interrupted by the arrival of other residents, who bring more information on what they discovered about the new structures; we hear the ladies arguing and rethinking the position of the furniture, and we notice that, at a certain moment, the camera leaves the filmmaker's hands and hangs around her neck while she tries to understand how the touch-sensitive stove works, with one of the residents. These moments are part of the documentary produced, they reflect the encounter of these people with their new homes, the place of the camera in these moments, and the filmmaker's relationship with the documented situation.

Figure 3 Film still, Ilha da Bela Vista. By Ana Clara Roberti

Despite the fact that there is still the editing and post-production phase in films, this *lucid trance*, or *cine-trance*, forces the director to select while filming. It is a synthesis, or cinematic report, made during the observation itself, thus under penalty of irreversible failure (Rouch and Feld 2003: 39). Failure can mean not visually documenting decisive moments for the understanding of the theme portrayed, not framing or focusing in the intended manner a sudden event, or, more serious than all the examples cited, breaking the relationship of trust and intimacy established with the *other*, by making him/her uncomfortable and insecure in the presence of the camera and the ethnographer/filmmaker. Practical examples of these situations will be presented later in this article.

3 Short documentary available at: vimeo.com/manage/videos/343682867/c03eb1b772

Thinking without the camera

The camera performance went through different phases in the fieldwork of *Island City*, varying according to the development of the relationship with the subject. At first, the images were general (figures 4 and 5), less intimate, and did not relate directly to the residents of the chosen locations. Later, without the camera, it was necessary to build closer relationships with the people involved, explain the intentions of the work, generate mutual trust, and understand the most effective and comfortable way to approach each situation. In the next phase, after being freely accepted in the fieldwork, the *lucid trance* of the camera began acting in different ways.

Figure 4 Photo of Rainha Dona Leonor Social Housing. By Ana Clara Roberti

Figure 5 Film still, Rainha Dona Leonor Social Housing. By Ana Clara Roberti

In this sense, we apply Quetzil Castañeda's concept and the value (ethical, moral, political, human, scientific) of the *right here, right now* of fieldwork in his Invisible Theatre of Ethnography (Castañeda 2006: 87). It is about valuing the fieldwork *per se*, at the moment it takes place. The focus is on the action that happens in the field, freeing oneself from the constant concern with the subsequent report, in this case, through image and sound. At several moments, it was more important to just witness and interact, thus analysing and rethinking the strategies to be used according to the scenarios observed.

"(...) the separation of these values might liberate ethnography from the burden of 'moral science' in order to explore alternative and different agendas of representation, communication, and dissemination of knowledge" (Castañeda 2006: 87).

Approaching the residents also led to a growing recognition of the responsibility of understating when not to film. The course of this work included moments that would have given strength and impact to the audio-visual materials produced, but it seemed to imply a breach of trust or respect to record them. People's trust was also built up in this sense. Through a more sensitive than verbal agreement, they knew they could confess their despondency at decisive moments, take off their shoes at home, or discuss family matters that spontaneously arose.

We often see considerations about what and how one should film. Being aware of the right moment, at the right time; paying attention to unusual and spontaneous situations; knowing how to frame the object being filmed; or how to work in a favourable light; etc. The opposite, however, is not so common. It is a matter, scientific and artistic, of trying to learn what to give up and accepting that this abdication is as important as mastering the camera or academic writing, or more so. The main ally in the resolution of this dilemma — always variable and under risk of error — is one's own experience in the field, close to the subject of study, to understand it little by little.

In one of the neighbourhoods we worked on, Tapada — in this one, the dwellings belonged to a private individual and not to the municipality — all the houses had been sold to a private company in 2017, which intended to build housing for tourism purposes. The residents were notified only after the purchase was completed. They were at risk of being evicted when the contracts for the rented houses expired. Faced with this situation, they decided to fight for their right to remain in the neighbourhood they had lived in for generations, they organized themselves and took legal and political action. The goal was successfully accomplished, and the inhabitants won the right to live in Tapada, but they went through a long process full of uncertainties. In the meantime, between 2017 and 2019, several moments occurred when the camera did not take place.

For example, when the dwellers received a visit from the supposed heirs of the former owners, who came to claim their right over the houses. Surprised, the residents found themselves even more insecure and afraid. I had prepared myself to document the testimonies about this visit, but upon arriving in the neighbourhood I realized that this fieldwork was not to go as planned. I noticed that the resident who had told me about it over the phone was different than usual. She was one of the most active forces of Tapada, always determined and hopeful, with the mission of motivating and making others aware of the cause that affected every one of them. That day she was down, discouraged, and tiredness was threatening the fight. It was a day to talk, not to show up. The camera didn't even come out of my backpack. I just sat on her couch, listened and showed empathy. Later, at the house of the president of the Neighbourhood Association, after we had dinner and talked about other issues, the moment seemed right to register the new situation, which would be able to give other outlines to the case. This could have been an important piece in the history that was unfolding about the neighbourhood, but this does not mean that it should be documented at any cost, or in any way.

For different reasons, the meals at the Tapada residents' homes, some planned, others spontaneous, were not always recorded. Of course, there are images of those moments, important to celebrate and to value the way of life of these people in an intimate and unpretentious way (figure 6). However, always having the camera in front of my eyes would not allow me to interact, gesture, eat at the same time as the others, or be available to help in any way I could. The impulse to record was replaced, when necessary, by the importance of simply sitting at the table while the food was still hot.

4 Free translation by the authors, the original speech is in Portuguese.

Figure 6 Photo of Tapada residents. By Ana Clara Roberti

In the case of ethnographic documentary work, which opts for an immersion of its author/researcher in the *here and now* of fieldwork, it is necessary to make a great effort to understand the sensitivity of information gathering with the characters and situations involved. Producing results in these contexts includes presence and availability. In this sense, we refer to the approach already presented here: dialogued, patient, and little invasive. Each *island* has its own rules, dynamics, and particularities. The long and immersive research allows this kind of sensibility — subtle and *lucid* — to be gradually more assertive in the negotiation/relationship with the *other*. Filmmaker João Moreira Salles punctuates this issue quite directly when he says that "the documentary is not a consequence of the theme, but a way of relating to the theme." (Salles 2005: 6)

Following the same line of approach, director Tiago Pereira, based on his project *A Música Portuguesa a Gostar dela Própria* (AMPAGDP) — which recorded hundreds of musical and choreographic manifestations, stories and songs from Portugal's twenty-eight districts plus the islands (Azores and Madeira) — makes a critical reflection on his work in the documentary *Porque Não Sou o Giacometti do Século XXI* (2015). This self-critical and subjective reflection about nonfiction filmmaking (Renov 2004) is in many ways similar to the questions raised in this research. In both cases, these are projects that could continue with their initial proposal, justified by the need to document disappearing traditions and ways of life, to preserve, through documentary, the history of people and places in a logic of perpetuating oral and visual memory. However, as the work developed, they were faced with a series of questions about their right to be, film and represent these realities that were, in a way, alien to their mentor - Tiago Pereira is not a musician, I wasn't born on an island or in a social housing.

One of the conclusions he reaches about his project is also very similar to what happens in this case. As he gains experience with the reflections raised by documentary work and thinking with the camera, praising the character and treating them with dignity and ethics is consolidated as a basic premise, which should shine through in the results:

It's a question of praising people. (...) You want them to look and feel beautiful. (...) This is about people and people have to feel good about what they do. (...) This work is always humanistic. It's about what you're going to meet (...) It's always about the person you're going to meet. (Pereira, 2015, 0:28:00)[4]

Fieldwork as art

Regarding this relationship between the documentarian and the characters, mediated by the camera — by its *lucid trance*, or by the option not to film — it is important to talk about the moment in which the encounter with

the *other* is developed. That is, the fieldwork itself becomes a context of sociability or lived, experiential and sensitive space. The researcher controls — or tries to control — this space, but this also depends on the interpretation of his subject of study. To this end, we will return to Castañeda's Invisible Theatre of Ethnography (Castañeda 2006; Koch 2019).

The author discusses the representative, performative and, necessarily, intervening aspects of ethnographic work, comparing it directly with the Invisible Theatre[5], developed by Augusto Boal. Although our study does not have a central objective to provoke changes in the realities we work on, as in the case of Boal's Theatre, this matter may escape the researcher's domain. This is because it does not depend exclusively on the researcher's will, but also on the development of the *other's* own relationship with the researcher and the scientific filmmaking process. It is about the awareness that we, researchers, are for the subject of study — in this case, socioeconomically fragile populations, used to being portrayed in a paternalistic or exotic way — the *other*.

From recognising the complexity of what is produced and experienced in fieldwork, the author discusses how to rethink its importance at the moment it takes place, and not only through the later results to be presented to different audiences. In the case of the documentary, we make this comparison by focusing on the moment in which the work is being performed, in the act of filming, in the interaction with the subject. As a consequence, one of the goals is to reduce anxiety about the later phase of interpretation and editing of what was collected, of analysis and reconfiguration of the audio-visual material to be presented in future contexts — in the academic and/or artistic sphere, when its content will belong more to the audience than to the ethnographer/documentarian. Instead, we aim to focus on the performance and importance of the ethnographic and documentary work *per se*, so as not to shape it according to these future scenarios, but to make it a consequence of the *here and now* of the fieldwork.

Writing, speaking, or making films about the encounter with the *other* is different from saying who these *others* are, "in many ways, the moralism of ethnographic writing (...) is precisely the (im)possibility of rendering not only ethical dilemmas but this invisibility of fieldwork into transparency. (Castañeda 2006: 82). So assuming the experience and vulnerabilities of the documentarian in the field frees — with the proper cautions — the work from ethical dilemmas of ethnographic and documentary science, such as the exoticization of the subject of study and the implied *superiority* of those who define it as such. Castañeda (2006: 86) argues that to study ethnographic work in its performative nature, in its very act and paths constructed through living in the fieldwork, is to bring it closer to its essence, its self-definition, and consequently to value the relationship with the characters involved.

This focus on the action of fieldwork *per se*, contributes to being able to observe other types of dynamics. Such as the invisible theatre performed by the two parties, the researcher and the research subject. It is common to talk about how the participant acts through the presence of the documentarist, the camera, etc. However, it is fundamental to remind that this relationship comprises a kind of acting on both sides. The ethnographer also acts and changes his strategies and behaviour to get the information he wants.

The script, or the research questions the researcher/filmmaker developed, provoke the target of his inquiries. The object of study is not passive, it reacts, reassembles the questions, improvises and interprets, that is, creates meanings of its own. The play — here with a double meaning — results from this interaction, partly premeditated, partly reinvented. The portrait that is produced does not say who the *other* is, or what defines him/her, but is rather the interpretation of the *here and now* of the fieldwork, of the play created from this encounter.

The effect of the presence and proximity — or lack of proximity — of the researcher and the subject may contain a great and complex richness

5 This is one of the stages that result in the Theater of the Oppressed (Boal 1985), a type of theatre in a public or semi-public space, which aims to provoke social changes in a soft, or non-violent way. In this sense, the activity intends not only to represent reality, but to change it as it happens, through interaction with the audience (Castañeda 2006: 77).

to explore. Therefore, we emphasise valuing fieldwork as an experience and a result simultaneously. This would be not only the moment for collecting information but also for producing it. Looking at fieldwork as art is a way to highlight its sensibility. "I set out to make the case that fieldwork is, or should be regarded as, art. (...) We need to introduce or reintroduce a more dramatic contrast between doing fieldwork and gathering data." (Castañeda 2006: 75)

The space of uncertainties and experimentation existing in fieldwork leads us to perceive it as a territory of instability. This is where the most human and empirical nature of this type of activity resides, and thus should not be discarded, disregarded, or little explored for fear of showing insecurity.

In ethnographic films involving participant observation, this relationship — rather than a negotiation — invariably leads the documentarist into constructing his/her own film. Naturally, the level and type of this presence vary according to the subject, context, and the filmmaker's own style choices, but the expression of the encounter with the *other* is there, as highlighted by Colusso:

A relational process — between the filmmaker and the subject — that, inscribing itself in the film images and the film-text, becomes an integral part of the narrative the film delivers, thus also allowing the audience to partake and witness the unfolding of that particular encounter and of its ethical significance. (Colusso 2017: 144)

In the case of Tapada, there are moments when a direct dialogue is established between the residents and the person behind the camera (figure 7) — the researcher/filmmaker. This environment that puts people at ease to interrupt a shot with a serious or trivial conversation, or to pass carelessly in front of the camera, was created in a gradual and intentional way and is another reason that encourages the choice of the director as the one responsible for filming as well. In several moments, the images were made without a tripod, and the sound was connected to the camera without needing a clapperboard. There was also no light preparation, or any other element to compose the set. The filming happened fluidly, when the occasion seemed appropriate, even if it was during a dialogue, as long as it did not have to be interrupted because of the camera's action.

Figure 7 Film still, Ilha da Bela Vista. By Ana Clara Roberti

On other occasions, the characters' speech is specifically about the camera's presence. When filming some unusual situation, for example, the repeated and unsuccessful attempt to fix with a broomstick the decorations of the São João[6] party, ruined by the wind, a resident shouts from afar, in an amusing way, that it was not to be recorded, "look what she is filming!".

6 São João is the biggest popular festivity in the city of Porto, it happens every year between the 23rd and 24th of June. It commemorates the birth of St. John the Baptist and takes place in the streets, neighbourhoods and houses of the city. It is celebrated with long-standing traditions: typical foods, decorations, music, etc.

In an even more unpretentious way, during the same party, a group of children asked if they could jump over the director and the camera, positioned close to the ground during a framing shot. This attitude of non-inhibition in front of the camera (figure 8) — but rather of direct reference to it, considering it part of this relationship, or an opportunity for interaction — is important to demonstrate, through the objects created, the attitude assumed in the fieldwork.

Figure 8 Photo of St. John the Baptist celebration in the Tapada neighbourhood. By Ana Clara Roberti

The ethnographic film embraces this kind of approach and highlights subtle moments that often have great meaning for the characters. It deals with the symbolic construction of everyday life and is also powerful in "giving some idea of what these experiences mean to those who participate in them. This it does by showing the emotional or psychological impact that these experiences have or by providing the protagonists with the opportunity to give their own explanations about them". (Henley 2000: 213)

The truth of the *right here and right now*

Having highlighted the importance and place of fieldwork in this documentary domain, specifically within the scope of the *Island City* project, it was also fundamental to assume a way of behaving in it and to specify the type of information that would be interesting to collect and produce. Understanding this issue also meant going into the field with a clearer idea of how to conduct the relationship and interaction with the subject, with, or without the camera.

We argue that the *truth* of this research has as a principle to assume and respect what the *other* intends to offer and/or present to the documentarist. If, by turning on the camera, or the recorder, there is an immediate change of behaviour of the one who presents himself/herself in front of them, then this will be the *truth of the right here and right now* of the fieldwork.

The interaction of the people portrayed with the camera and the filmmaker, the sudden changes in focus and direction, the walking while filming, and the *lucid trance*. All of this is part of the way of making an ethnographic documentary discussed in this paper. It combines improvisation, the dynamic and uncontrollable nature of reality, and the *camera as an extension of the body*, taking on the eyes and hands of the person filming the scene. This intrinsic combination adds the importance of intuition as an exercise of trust in the instinct of the documentarist himself/herself. "What is there is that sudden intuition about the necessity to film, or conversely, the certainty that one should not film". (Rouch and Feld 2003: 43)

In this sense, we can approach aspects of Rouch's *Cinéma Vérité* to discuss the commitment to the truth of the captured moment. The camera transits between the scenarios, walks in the hands of the documentarist, discards the need for repetitions to seek the best angle of action, and assumes the active participation of what and/or who is being filmed. These characteristics are part of the work of gathering and processing the material in this research and reinforce the value of fieldwork as a decisive moment in producing information. We thus return to Rouch's ideas about the spontaneity and risks of this type of ethnography:

It is this aspect of fieldwork that marks the uniqueness of the ethnographic filmmaker: instead of elaborating and editing his notes after returning from the field, he must, under penalty of failure, make his synthesis at the exact moment of observation. In other words, he must create his cinematic report, bending it or stopping it, at the time of the event itself. (Rouch and Feld 2003: 39)

Consequently, this kind of cinema can be quite different from the glamour of the big productions and the colonialist attitude toward the subject. Instead, it approaches the spontaneous and improvised relationships between the self and the *other* and gives voice to individualities.

Just as the camera's approach and more active participation in the characters' actions, assuming the authorial and subjective nature of the work can help avoid the concept of absolute *truth* about a theme. It is the interpretation of a framework — among infinite other possibilities — of a certain reality, not its characterization or *faithful* portrait. For Michael Renov, it is precisely this ethical commitment of the encounter that is responsible for differentiating documentary from fiction, even though there is more and more hybridization between both fields (Renov 2008; Ellis 2021; Slugan and Terrone 2021). 'That's really what documentary has to share with the world, and we can't, no matter how interested we are in the formal, we can't ever give up that connection to the ethical register'. (Renov 2008: 174)

By freeing itself from the illusory objectivity and the commitment to an absolute *truth*, the documentary transits between variations, becomes able to assume the influence of its author and the active participation of the subject it addresses. This openness to experimentation blurs the line between documentary and fiction and opens precedents for assuming the fictional aspects present in all documentaries and the documentary basis of all fiction. The distinction made by Renov seems to clarify this issue without depriving both fields of the interesting results of this crossing.

We assume, therefore, that the ethnographic documentary produced in *Island City* is, in essence, an encounter with the *other*, whether this is a city, a community, or a person. This encounter is inevitably guided by the subjective perspective of the one who provokes and builds the final object and the one who reacts actively to this idea. It is an ethical dialogue sensitive to the attitude of the one who controls the camera and the one who chooses to accept it. A permanent negotiation of the *right here and right now* of fieldwork, "our challenge is to remain connected with this notion of the ethical, that the relationship is always about the I and the thou, myself and the person on the other side of the camera". (Renov 2008: 172)

Conclusions

This paper addressed different aspects of the encounter between the filmmaker and the character in ethnographic films, based on a personal experience in the research project *Island City*. This includes the production of documentaries about socioeconomically fragile populations rooted in the city of Porto and who have their own dynamics and way of living. We discussed the importance and responsibility of following the long processes of transformations that those *urban islands* have gone through, by an approach that prioritizes immersion in fieldwork and attention to the *small* daily nuances of these people's lives and places.

We highlight the ethical commitment of the documentary toward the subject and its competence in showing (making visible) the particularities of distinct realities through an artistic and committed perspective. In other words, to take it to the heart of the *subtleties* of these issues. Therefore, we intend to continue to explore and produce in this field through a *dialogued, patient* and *little invasive* approach.

We reinforced the idea that talking about the encounter(s) with the *other* is fundamentally different from identifying and defining the *other* or assuming such an identification or definition is even possible. In discussing this issue, we argued that the *right here and right now of fieldwork* is a phase of this process, which, besides generating content for the subsequent actions — of interpretation and editing the information collected — has value as it unfolds. It reflects on the subjective *truth* of the moment filmed, of the dialogue between the character, the camera, and the filmmaker.

The *lucid trance* of the camera and the decision to not film exemplify the dynamics of those moments, which demand sensibility and responsibility from the researcher/filmmaker in the face of the events and relationships established in the field. We believe this is one of the ways to emphasize and fulfil the obligations of the documentary from the *inside*, from the commitments established with the characters, i.e., with real people.

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The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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