

The montage of “Cine Rabeca”: music, memory and ethnography in an expanded cinema experience.

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Abstract

“Cine Rabeca” is a documentary that expands onto the stage and blends live music with ethnographic archive. It is a cine-concert, where musicians Luiz Paixão and Renata Rosa are permanently on stage, dialoguing with their own filmic memories. During the performance, a new time is composed out of what is seen, heard and imagined. The passage of time is felt in the contrast between images of the rural world of Pernambuco, Brazil, in 1990-2000 and the image of the presence of the musicians on stage.

In this cinematographic re-encounter with their trajectories, Paixão and Rosa improvise with their rabecas (fiddles) and recreate themselves. Through music, they circulate amongst rural and ancestral festivities and the narrative is permeated with the language of memory, which explores traces and reminiscences.

Time and memory articulate themselves in a singular space that experiments with a form of collaboration between the languages of music, film, and anthropology. This paper explores the process of making this expanded documentary and how it has remained live during the last years, constantly transforming itself amongst the borders of the stage and the screen, between life and film. It shows a process of unfinished that transcends the finalization of documentaries; of the very life that follows ethnographic recordings.

Keywords: Ethnographic archive, Documentary, Life, Cine-concert, Image-making.

Introduction

Images insist on their re-appearances. Archives, amongst a few other reasons, are made to be remembered in the future. When time passes and an archive is re-taken, layers of time are interrelated and mingle with the images. Even if these images are just the same, they are seen differently. Although efforts are made to safeguard sounds, dances and music by recordings, later, when they are seen, they turn into something else. One of the causes for that is that image is relational. It relies on the viewers' eyes; it exists as access to complex imaginaries; it conveys relationships.

Much of the research archival made in the context of anthropological and ethnomusicological studies is rarely publicly seen or heard by external communities. Unless finalized to be experimented broadly in festivals, educational circuits, museums, etc, they remain in universities' archives and, commonly, in the researchers' houses, waiting to be destined.

Sometimes, though, they resurface. They come to life as rare images, rarely seen, and indeed valuable, for this very reason too. To see again, in public or in a group, what became shared old memories is an intense experience.

Youtube has made this process more common over the last decade. Researchers and amateurs have been digitizing their personal archive and making them available online. Once these rare images appear, they make us think about what we see, what has changed, but they also make us think about the reasons why they have remained unseen for so long!

As Hito Steyerl puts it, they are “poor images” in comparison to high quality images made for movie theaters, for entertainment. They are marginalized in the image-making industry. But they are coming back and claiming their very existence (Steyerl, 2009). They become the object of remixing techniques and experiments, they become the object of criticism by researchers and by communities depicted. Ultimately, they became the means to reconcile, not only with the past, but specially with the future.



Cine Rabeca Rehearsals. Picture by Marina Thomé.

From the old days

Luiz Paixão was born in a family of musicians: his uncle and grandfather are remembered as great *rabequeiros* (fiddlers). A brilliant instrumentalist and self-taught fiddler, he was native of the sugar-mill region of Pernambuco, Brazil. Like many children back then, started working on the sugar-cane plantation at 8 years old. Luiz was fascinated by the *rabeca* (fiddle) sound from that early age, but as a child he was not allowed to touch the instrument. Nevertheless, whenever he had a chance, in between festivities, the boy would slip into the room where the instruments were located to secretly experiment with all he used to hear. With time, his uncle allowed him to play the instrument whenever he came to his house. The young

apprentice started fingering the notes, and learned to play by himself as he reproduced the sounds of the parties of the rural world. One day, the uncle proposed an exchange that would mark his destiny: the *rabeca* for a chicken that Luiz raised. The boy accepted the deal and went home with his first instrument. Fifty years later, Luiz would leave his job in the rural zone to become a professional musician, performing on national and international stages.

I started shooting the images seen in “Cine Rabeca” around 2001. I was fascinated by the beauty of the Cavalo-Marinho from Pernambuco, Brazil. The cavalo-marinho is a musical-choreographic-poetic performance that happens around the Christmas period and reflects labor relations in the sugar cane fields (Murphy, 1994). It can be thought of as a theater presentation that has over 70 characters – a popular drama that lasts a whole night, until the sun rises, with a musical ensemble of five instrumentalists seated side by side in a single bench. The *rabeca* is the only melodic instrument of the Cavalo-Marinho.

In 2004, I started producing a documentary about Luiz Paixão by invitation of musician and singer Renata Rosa, who learned to play with Luiz and became his partner in albums, cavalo-marinhos, concerts and festivals. I filmed and worked with Luiz and Renata for the following 5 years. Then, a small polystyrene box with 23 Hi8 video tapes remained with me for 15 years. Soon after filming, I no longer had access to the devices that played those tapes. In the early 2000s, we rapidly went from video tapes to digital data storage, and I lost access to the content of the tapes. As time went by, the scenes, statements, and performances filmed were being forgotten — and the material turned into a personal collection. I only kept vague memories, that were activated by the labels of the tapes, in its metadata: *Luiz Paixão in the sugarcane mill, Rehearsals to record first album, Cavalo-Marinho at Maíca's birthday*.



<https://vimeo.com/693110223/201f384578>
Two rabecas playing

Cine Rabeca: a collaborative expanded documentary project

Retrieving this material was a permanent project. It was only in 2018, the same year I began my PhD studies, that I was able to retake the archive.¹ On the verge of finally being digitized and visualized, the filmic collection carried within it the pulse of time, the urgency of a reunion, and the desire to understand how the life that followed the shootings would dialogue with the memory printed in the images. The time passed between the shootings and the editing transformed raw material into a collection and the documentary into an archive film. Over 15 years after I started filming, “Cine Rabeca” was finalized in collaboration with its main characters, the musicians Luiz Paixão and Renata Rosa. The expanded documentary is staged with a live soundtrack by the two artists. In the performance, they are in the center of the stage, sitting side by side on a single bench. A documentary about their life trajectory, made through film archive from 1991-2009 is screened behind them.

The music brings the archives back to life and the montage talks about time, memory, disappearances and the incessant fabrication of images. This movement of the double film-performance creates a new image that conveys traces of time by evoking memories. Underlining the passage of time is the contrast between the *cavalo-marinho* of the Brazilian rural zone of 1990-2000 in the film and the image of Luiz Paixão and Renata Rosa on stage, materializing this world through the music. The transit of the gaze between the stage and the screen reveals the relations between the documentary and the subjects that were filmed and, ultimately, between life and film. The relationship between the musicians on stage and their filmic past showed a process of unfinished that transcends the completion of documentaries; of the very life that follows film production and the epochs they bring within them.

The ethnographic archive: another gaze

During the research for editing the script of *Cine Rabeca*, intrigued by Luiz Paixão's testimonials about Mestre Batista, one of his greatest musical references who taught him a lot of what he new about *Cavalo-Marinho* festivities, we found in the video sharing platform Youtube, an eight-part series entitled “*Cavalo-Marinho do Mestre Batista*”, filmed by ethnomusicologist and musician John Murphy in 1991. In recent years, Murphy digitized and made his PhD research material available. His collection includes “fifty hours of audio recordings, sixty hours of video, dozens of photographs, a *rabeca*, a collection of books, and other written documentation” (Murphy, 1994).

The videos were beautiful and presented the same *characters* I had filmed, but they were 15 years younger. I contacted Murphy by email, presenting my documentary project. I received his authorization

and encouragement to use the images and later we scheduled an interview based on the questions I was reflecting upon on the research for my thesis. He was quite happy that the material could have a second life. Later, he sent the audiovisual material in a better quality, along with articles he had authored and other memorabilia from his field research.

The first rehearsals of “Cine Rabeca” were made only with images from the 2000s, because I had not yet found Murphy’s collection. When these images became part of the cine-concert *montage*, another field was activated, even more distant and forgotten, but at the same time intensely present. The encounter of the images from John Murphy’s research would reveal other textures in the images that I myself had produced: it would bring to light elements hitherto invisible in my material. How would the encounter between these images create a new image, under today’s gaze? What elements would be revealed with the passage of time?

Renata Rosa recalls that Luiz’s musical performance was decisively transformed when he started to interact with the images of the 1990s. Perhaps, upon seeing his old companions, Luiz experienced an infusion of vitality and belonging. Luiz’s joy and surprise at rediscovering his past on the big screen produced a new creative impulse. During rehearsals, Renata noticed that Luiz was putting himself more firmly in opinions and musical ideas, as if the images were reminding him of the musical relevance of his trajectory and awakening a sense of empowerment.

When they merged, Murphy’s research footage and the raw material for what would be my ethnographic short film became a third thing, which was not the initial destination we had both initially imagined. The audiovisual records produced in the Zona da Mata of the 1990s were not made to become a film; the material I had produced was also not intended to be shown in conjunction with the presence of the musicians on a stage. Together, our materials became something new and recreated themselves under the gaze of the rabeca, which remained as a connecting thread between the collections.

Luiz’ music was what brought him closer to Renata and Murphy. It was also through his *rabeca* that I connected with them. Hence, the editing of “Cine Rabeca” was an experience that gave ethnographic collections a new life, through the interweaving of multiple paths. It showed that what survived in the archives was more than images, music and festivities; it was the way in which documented things speak about themselves and their own disappearances.

End Notes

¹ The project to finalize the film was selected to take part in the artistic residency of the Contemporary Studies Center of the Museum of Image and Sound of São Paulo (MIS-SP). The PhD was conducted at Universidade Estadual de Campinas, UNICAMP, 2018-2022.

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