

*Documentaries as a Tool for Collecting and Disseminating Memories of Self-Initiated  
Community Practices: The Case of Workshop School*

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**Abstract**

The aim of the research presented in this paper was to observe and record in documentary form the human dimension intrinsic to self-initiated community practices in social neighbourhoods in V.N. Gaia, Portugal. This work was carried out as part of the research project "ECO: Echoing the Community Self". Of the practices identified by the ECO project, Workshop School (WS) was chosen as the object of analysis and intervention in this documentary work. This project adopted an action-research methodology and used audiovisual tools in order to respond to an identified problem: the lack of visibility of the impact that the activity developed by WS has on people. The work was divided into 3 stages: a) fieldwork to diagnose the problem; b) intervention (documentary film aimed at giving visibility to the people who directly benefit from the WS's activity: the trainees); and finally, c) evaluation of the result. In order to observe and diagnose the problem, it was also necessary to adopt an ethnographic methodology, using fieldwork techniques and methods to get closer to the object of study, the most important elements in the creation and development of self-initiated educational practices. This work informed the next stage, in which different mechanisms were adopted to record and construct an audiovisual narrative, based on the testimonies of the people involved in the learning processes mobilised by WS. In order to evaluate the results, they were presented with the intention of contemplating and analysing the reception and perception of the people portrayed in the project.

Keywords: Audiovisual Design, Communication Design, Ethnographic Documentary, Community Practices, Social Neighbourhoods

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## **Introduction**

The aim of this work was to observe and record in documentary form the human dimension intrinsic to self-initiated community practices in social neighborhoods in Vila Nova de Gaia. This work was carried out as part of the exploratory research project "ECO: Echoing the Community Self: designing the dissemination and replication of self-initiated practices in underprivileged urban communities in a post-pandemic world". Of the practices identified by the ECO project, Escola Oficina (EO) was chosen as the object of analysis and intervention in this documentary work.

This project adopted an action-research methodology and used audiovisual tools in order to respond to an identified problem: the lack of visibility of the impact that the activity developed by EO has on people. The work was divided into 3 stages: a) fieldwork to diagnose the problem (study of information and informal conversations); b) intervention (documentary film aimed at giving visibility to the people who directly benefit from the EO's activity: the trainees); and finally, c) evaluation of the result (realising how the EO and the people portrayed in the documentary see themselves in it).

In order to observe and diagnose the problem, it was also necessary to adopt an ethnographic methodology, using fieldwork techniques and methods to get closer to the object of study, the most important elements in the creation and development of self-initiated practices: people in general, technicians, managers, students and trainers. This work informed the next stage, in which different mechanisms were adopted to record and construct an audiovisual narrative, based on the testimonies of the people involved in the learning processes mobilised by EO. In order to evaluate the results, they were presented with the intention of contemplating and analysing the reception and perception of the people portrayed in the project. This work sought to mobilise those involved in constructing an identity through documentary film as a memory device.

## **Main Objectives**

The primary goal of this project was to explore the potential of the audiovisual format of documentary film as a tool for collecting and sharing testimonies related to the impact of the Escola Oficina (EO) on people's lives. To achieve this overarching goal, the following specific objectives were outlined:

- Conduct fieldwork to understand the dynamics of EO, recording testimonies from teachers, trainers, technical assistants, managers, and coordinators about their experiences at EO.
- Produce documentary cinema narratives based on the collected testimonies, highlighting their subjective, poetic, and authorial dimensions, distinguishing this genre from journalistic reportage.
- Experiment with various editing models using filmed and recorded sound material, maintaining technical rigor while exploring the experimental potential in interrelating these visual and auditory elements during the narrative construction process.
- Evaluate the impact and outcomes of using audiovisual tools in documentary creation to foster collective perception and recognition of EO's contributions.

## **The Origins of Documentary Cinema**

As a starting point, it is pertinent to provoke more objective enquiries in relation to documentary as a film genre. First of all, even before giving a more detailed overview of the history of cinema, it's worth asking a simple question: what is documentary cinema?

In order to translate what documentary cinema means, we first need to understand how cinema emerged as a language medium. There is no closed consensus on who was able to promote the signature of the first cinematographic experiment, the information is tied to the end of the 20th century and is rather imprecise. What is a pertinent statement in this regard is that cinema was not born out of a purely technical and scientific need, very much due to the path that photography had already travelled in its artistic and conceptual dimension. It is possible to infer that the history of cinema began at the end of 1880, with the invention of the first film camera, and thus developed into an important communication and entertainment tool.

Formally, among Europeans and North Americans, there are more categorical discussions that defend the birth of cinema, as an entertainment tool, from the first known public screening in the world, held on 28 December 1895, by the brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière, at the Grand Café in Paris.

Considered one of the most influential intellectuals of the North American school of cinema today, Bill Nichols suggests that the Lumière brothers were the protagonists of the first popular cinema movement, which gave them the expression of the fathers of cinema (Nichols, 1997).

In its first practical performances, cinema was organised by capturing real images, events, places, objects and situations. According to critic Kristin Thompson, the images were short frames, no longer than two to three minutes, and mostly recorded images of everyday life. According to the author, the documentary was the first film genre to be created in the entire history of cinema (Thompson, 2002).

Given these preliminary considerations about the origins of documentary cinema and its first competences in society, its practical performances and inspirations, it is possible to suggest that cinema was born documentary. From the films of the Lumière brothers to the films of Dziga Vertov, cinema does not emerge as a simple vehicle for narrative transmission; it is born with the artistic purpose of re-signifying the viewer's hitherto unseen gaze on the moving image. It was later that cinema was appropriated as an entertainment tool to lead to other narrative constructions that were more technical, more refined and already heavily invested in.

As the capacity for technical reproducibility developed and consolidated, over the decades cinema was able to accompany a wide range of possibilities for artistic elaboration. Openings arose that were capable of advancing increasingly daring and innovative productions, according to the technological availability of each moment.

Documentary cinema, therefore, is mobilised and characterised through a model of direct narrative communication, comprising a number of codes and languages capable of reaching subjects who share the same impression of the 'real' captured by the filmmakers. In other words, documentary cinema proposes a dialogue with the subject being filmed. And it is from

this communication that identity, cultural and ethnographic elements multiply, both in those who are portrayed or observed, and in those who are spectators and perceive themselves as capable of sharing impressions, subjectivities, affections and experiences.

In general, those interested in documentary cinema were, and still are, those who value the connection between a pact of realities as a way of accessing knowledge, whether scientific, empirical, social, practical or technological. The scales at which these realities collide among viewers can work from distant or close points of view, the important thing is that they are realities that are connected by this bond of apparent capture of the imprecise moment, the unscathed and inapprehensible moment.

In its formal dimension, documentary cinema also encompasses an immense range of languages, from more essayistic styles to more objective and didactic systems.

We have therefore come to the conclusion that, when composing a narrative device in documentary cinema, it is advisable to emphasise both the communicative purpose of a documentary piece and the choice of a well-defined form in which to communicate.

### **The Relationship Between the Director and the Characters**

The primary concern in this work, in terms of documentary recording, is the way in which the representations of elements of everyday life are assimilated by the viewer. A crossing that indicates ruptures not only in its narrative structure format, but also in its pact and mediation with the viewer, in its breakdown of expectations and the simulated connections proposed by contemporary mediatisation.

What Free Cinema and True Cinema called the real and put into dispute in the field of film language would therefore be, according to Comolli (2008), a layer of the world that is not apprehended in any narrative, that escapes all narratives that have already been formed. The real, therefore, would be that which demands a new narrative, or challenges the narrative that has already been put forward (Comolli, 2008, p. 100).

In short, the project was guided by a detachment from the more formal rules of narrative construction so common to the environment of journalistic description in order to grasp the elements of what is considered 'real' in documentary cinema. The project is evidently detached from these models, not only due to the unequivocal lack of financial resources, but essentially due to the forces of conviction in a cinema that is more aligned with experimental, creative, inclusive and, above all, activist issues.

It was necessary to move away from the journalistic model of representation, which corresponds to a way of constructing facts and subjects that sometimes doesn't hide its modulations of narrative genre according to an almost natural and discriminatory movement of exoticising the elements narrated due to a lack of knowledge of the world that is to be described, acted upon and starred in.

This is also how researcher Ana Clara Roberti ponders, in her doctoral thesis, on the potential of the authorial ethnographic documentary and how it behaves as an effective alternative to this exoticising lens: Writing, speaking or making films about the encounter with the other is different from saying who these others are. Assuming the experience and vulnerabilities of documentary filmmaking in the field, with due care, frees the work from the ethical dilemmas

of ethnographic and documentary science, such as the exoticisation of the object of study and the superiority complex of those who define it as such (Roberti, 2020, p. 42).

It is also important to highlight the work of Brazilian film director Eduardo Coutinho. Based on his cinematographic style, Coutinho doesn't care much if the characters he chooses characters present a testimony that corresponds to a status of truth or lie, fiction or reality, because what is at stake is not so much what is said, but a capacity to convince, a certain peculiar way of knowing how to rely on the memory of the present, mixing reason and sensitivity, revelation and imagination, fact and version (Bezerra, 2013, p. 404).

As a subjective and complementary justification, capable of referencing the intellectual framework of the practical activities to be carried out, the result of this proposed development was essentially characterised by the role of the spectator themselves.

Discussing, reflecting and trying to practice the game of positions where the film processes an exchange relationship, under the gaze of what we can call the emancipation of the spectator. Emancipation as the resumption of a relationship between human beings and themselves, a relationship lost in a process of separation (Rancière, 2011, p. 19).

This work functions as another search movement. An eternal search for human similarities, for linguistic singularities between the relationship with the other through the documentary. The search for a beauty uniquely contained in memory, based on testimony, for a moment of decompression and pact between director, spectator and filmed subject.

## **The Empirical Work**

The first stage of this methodological research model focused on developing an initial action project plan. A document was required to summarise and highlight the primary foundational stages of the activities to be undertaken during the project. This document needed to include the methodological steps and their applications, along with corresponding work schedules aligned with the project's specific timeline.

The methodological guidance stages were structured according to the practical and theoretical design of the project itself. The planning process was, therefore, invaluable in delineating and organising the stages and phases between practical, theoretical, and reflective activities, as well as determining how and when these activities could interconnect.

The planning phase also proved critical in considering the availability of access to locations and individuals interviewed throughout the image capture process. It anticipated logistical interventions based on the availability of suitable dates for video recording at EO and individual interviews. Moreover, it facilitated a realistic temporal framework for drafting this report and allowed sufficient time to gather participants' feedback through a reception questionnaire about the project's results.

The subsequent stage of this empirical work was divided into three phases:

Phase I - Observation/Diagnosis

Phase II - Intervention

Phase III - Evaluation/Reflection

## Conclusions

According to the initial objectives of this academic action project, several insights can be highlighted regarding the institutional and social role of self-initiated projects in Portugal, such as the case of EO. The researchers' engagement enabled them to outline the most prominent traits of a social action project that yields substantial benefits for an entire community, as reflected in the testimonies of the individuals interviewed during the process.

The core challenge and goal of this work revolved around the initial question: how could audiovisual media, through its applications and documentary cinema techniques, contribute to the collection and sharing of stories related to EO's impact on people's lives across its diverse layers and dimensions of activity? It is not possible to categorically assert whether the practical outcomes of this work provided definitive and objective answers. The methodologies employed for collecting results from the participants are insufficient to fully capture perceptions and measure the actual impact of this project's interventions. Nevertheless, through its scope and depth, and based on testimonies collected during visits and the feedback interview with participant Manuela Silva, the documentary indeed served as a powerful tool for memory collection and as complementary evidence of the transformative impact EO has had on those involved in its learning processes.

The power of the images, alongside Manuela's testimony about her reception of the film, is recognised by the researchers as unequivocal proof of how EO, as an institution, asserts the participation of these individuals as citizens within a collective whole.

The images function as empirical evidence of how a vocational training school can inspire and mobilise individuals within the social fabric to become protagonists of their own professional actions. They develop technical, social, and intellectual skills through structured and professional interactions with trainers, social action technicians, and mentors, offering a multifaceted and inclusive approach to creating new opportunities in the local labour market.

The images themselves hold layers of subjectivity woven into the complex relationships among trainees, the institution, trainers, physical learning spaces, the methodologies involved in the training processes, the teamwork dynamics developed by the students, and, finally, the interaction between the filmed subjects and the filmmaker.

The sequences captured reveal the richness of detail within these hubs of technical and professional knowledge at EO, which serve as the core of its role as a training entity. EO strives not only to provide professional guidance but also to foster new emotional connections and support individuals in overcoming personal challenges. The institution embraces dialogue with conflicting perspectives, tailors its approach to the personalised aspirations of trainees, and promotes voluntary collaboration as key features of a project that impacts the personal, professional, and subjective dimensions of the lives of all those involved in its various operational layers and phases.

One of the key conclusions of this project is rooted in the observation of how its audiovisual narrative format was capable of conveying the fundamental concept of self-initiated projects. These projects emerge as promising tools in addressing the country's current social realities and the processes deemed most significant in this context.

The practical outputs of this work provide an understanding of the general structural framework of this self-initiated project model, while also offering an opportunity for replication by other entities interested in working within the parameters outlined by the action project defended in this research.

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