

Exploring territories by documentary: The appropriation of public spaces by collective listening

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Abstract. Sound has a relational interplay with space, influencing the arrangement of ephemeral and symbolic territories in public spaces. Within this perspective, this article aims to discuss the influence of collective listening in the appropriation of public spaces, discussing the events conducted spontaneously by the youth in the Coronel Salles Square, São Carlos, Brazil. Weekly on Fridays, this marginalised community builds an ephemeral territory in the square, which is also influenced by collective listening by powerful speakers in cars. As methods, we use documentary procedures to take a closer look at these events. Being an assertion of the historical world, a perspective is taken by a non-neutral part, a documentary performed as practice-as-research offers a useful set of methods to researchers to explore urban issues and matters and, it is a reflexive method which questions the researcher's posture.

1 Introduction

Sound plays an essential role in the apprehension of the city and corresponds to society's ways of living by reflecting its actions and dynamics of daily life. Sound is an element that has a political and aesthetical potential since it reconfigures and participates in the multisensory apprehension of the city. Within this perspective, this article considers an inter-relational approach between sound and space, arguing that collective listening influences dynamics and uses of public spaces regarding ownership, frontiers and refuge.

Therefore, the sounds play a role in sociopolitical relations that take place in urban environments, influencing or reassuring perspectives, and making pre-existing conflicts more remarkable or elaborating them.

To discuss these matters, we develop a reading on the occupation of Coronel Salles Square (São Carlos, São Paulo State, Brazil) by teenagers who play aloud Brazilian funk music to provide a meeting point, as a form of appropriation of public space. The context of these practices is discussed briefly in the following section of this article. This article has an

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interdisciplinary approach by making a documentary in the research process to reach a specific issue in urban spaces [1].

The documentary tradition has complex and overlapping boundaries with fiction since documentarists, screenwriters and directors of fiction narratives are constantly exploring its limits [2 - 4]. In this article, we do not elaborate an exhaustive analysis on the film narrative or history of documentary film, since other authors have contributed significantly with this matter [2 - 5]. Instead, we argue that the means of a documentary video are useful to elaborate issues on daily life and, at the same time, being a non-neutral form of approach and representation, provides an immersion in which the researchers/documentarists may be aware of their influence on the addressed issues. This awareness raises questions on how to represent what we explore or discover during the process as well as it enabled a more in-depth approach of the researchers on the event.

The documentary film raises questions on the construction of the “self” and the “other”, and it has been used as a form of field research by social scientists, anthropologists, media researchers and others. Within this methodological perspective, the documentary video is fruitful for urban studies, either through analysis of documentaries [6] or by producing a documentary with research purposes [7]. The members of Nomads.usp, Center of Interactive Living Studies at the University of São Paulo, and research partners have been exploring the making of documentary videos as a key to interpret the city [8 - 10].

2 “Let’s go to the square!”



Fig. 1. View of Coronel Salles Square on Google Earth. The square’s area is highlighted.

It is Friday night at São Carlos, in the countryside of São Paulo State, which is the State with the highest population density of Brazil. The Coronel Salles’ Square is in the centre of the city of approximately 220 thousand inhabitants. The Coronel Salles’ Square, also called “Pigeons’ Square” or “Central Square”, is in an area of historical, commercial and economic interest. Many adolescents come from the impoverished peripheries by walking, by bus or by hitchhiking, while some of the oldest people, above 18 years old, arrive at the square by cars with potent speakers. The “open-air party” gathers teenagers and young adults, listening

and dancing to Brazilian funk in most of the time. Here, cars with powerful speakers, of which some are from dB-SPL competitions and others called “*paredão*” (we can translate literally as “big wall” since it is formed by speakers put side by side), play Brazilian funk and it is possible to listen to it a few blocks away. The lyrics of the music try to expose the problems of daily life in the *favelas* and other marginalised communities, discuss criminality and sometimes has high sexual content (*funk putaria*). These events occur on Friday nights and persist until the last buses leave or until the arrival of the military police.

There have been registers accessible online on these events since 2010 by local television news [11]. According to members of tutelary council and the secretariat of childhood and youth, both from city hall government at 2010, this group tried to occupy other different areas in the city, a shopping mall and another square. Even though this group has continuously been changing due to their ageing or change of personal interests, they were expelled by police, inhabitants or security guards from both locations.

Throughout this time, an independent music collective gave structure to these events by offering speakers and a cultural program. Later, the city hall government did similarly, but imposing more restrictions, as they curated the music. The programs used to include dance competitions, such as b-boy and street dance, and rap battles. Nevertheless, there was already some conflicts concerning the neighbourhood, mainly because of the loud sound, and some people also argued that there were problems with drug trafficking. In 2013, the city hall stopped its support due to the change of government by the elections. During the time of this research, in 2016 and 2017, there was a complicated situation between the teenagers and military police, a process that is further aggravated by the presence of drug dealers. Despite this statement, this context still represents a lack of events and shared activities in public spaces destined for these teenagers.

Despite its specificity, this context is essential for discussing this event. We understand these events on Friday night at the square as an ephemeral and symbolic territory, formed by the appropriation of this public space by the teenagers. We understand that the concept of ‘territory’ lies beyond a macropolitical configuration and formalisation, so uses, dynamics, practices also form a territory. As the Brazilian geographer Rogério Haesbaert [12] argues, the relations of appropriation are in a continuum: from the political-economic domination to the subjective and ‘cultural-symbolic’ appropriation. The appropriation of public space is also a matter of territory, which is constructed with exercised power by groups, institutions and people, in many different scales. Surely the power relations in this symbolic territory are not simple, due to the complex relationships among law, teenagers, drug dealers and the sociopolitical context. The party is not open to everyone since this event builds up an ephemeral symbolic territory that is difficult to be permeated by people who does not fit this group. This appropriation is fostered using collective listening. To observe and understand these events, we understand the concept of territory as fundamental to understand the relationship between people and space and recognise the importance of sound and collective listening.

3 Methods: making a documentary, interpreting public spaces

To better understand these relationships, we rely on our process of making a documentary video as an immersion on this subject, to approach and cover these relations of sound and appropriation of public space. The complex process of creating a documentary video, including research, argument, script, interviews, field recording, sound and image montage

and exhibition, can be performed as a method to read and represent the dynamics and sociopolitical issues of space.

The audiovisual product, and more precisely the film, fiction or documentary, is composed of a set of choices and stages of production. From the script to the final product, the audiovisual work, film or video, this process of non-neutral representation proposes many questions to the researcher. There is a historical line that separates fiction and documentary, notwithstanding both documentary and fiction filmmakers may tension the limits of this line.

At first, we must acknowledge that a documentary is a narrative form of audiovisual that is a creative representation of reality, an assertion, created by a non-neutral observer. The documentary video does not have ties to rules of narrative form or tools; i.e., it does not work with stable regulations or standards, as the film theoretician Bill Nichols [2] argues. Albeit it seems like a free form of work, the documentary may repeat a series of strategies in its process. Beyond that, a documentary has ties to a part of reality; it is an assertion, a point of view of a part of the historical world, that may be ethical or not, as Fernão Ramos [3] argues. A documentary shows an idea, an assertion on a specific matter. To consider a documentary as a statement also remarks that there is an oscillation between a historical reality's recognition and its representation by the observer, and the documentarist can also influence this reality, by acting in the given situation.

The documentary is a set of choices, stages of productions, raising questions, as well as highlighting to the researcher its choices, the point of view, ways of interpreting. The documentary itself is a proposition of field research and tool for revisiting the field during its post-production — furthermore, the documentary results in videos that can go beyond the academic community.

We had as a starting point to research tensions, limits and territories in urban space through documentary processes. This process from research to the final documentary took approximately five months. After that, we have made discussions on these processes and a reflexive analysis.

Regarding the documentary, we choose the following methods for our documentary on the events of the square: primary research on the overall context and the activities at the square; non-participant observation, in different schedules; participant observation with interviews with the occupants; video recording and audio recording. In addition to this, the post-production (i.e. video and audio editing) was also a moment to deepen the reflection on our role, as researchers, in this context.



Fig. 2. The teenagers in the square. Frame from the documentary video. Images by Maria J. S. Martins and Luciana S. Roça.

The field research conducted our choices for the documentary. First, the localisation of the square, surrounded by a sports club, commerce, banks, schools and the city council. The square without trees or comfortable seats is not so inviting, especially during the day due to the heat and sun. There are not so many places of permanence or high contact [13]. On the other side, when the events took place during our presence, this does not seem to be a problem to occupy the square. Groups usually occupy the stair steps while the cars are commonly in a narrow passage close to the city council. Since the beginning, it was already difficult for us, researchers, to be at the square even without cameras or audio recorders. During some interviews, the teenagers talked about the retaliation they suffer from the police, just for being at the square. Despite not being utilised in our documentary, the interviews highlight a strong opposition from the teenagers to the police. Thus, we took the ethical choice to not include any interviews on the documentary to save the identity of the teenagers and young adults, even with proper legal authorisation.

The young people interviewed by us reside peripheral neighbourhoods of different areas of the city. Most of them use public transportation to get to the central square. In some cases, their responsible adults bring them to the square. The meetings are publicised at social networking events and in the "word of mouth" between friends. What motivates them to go to the square is the possibility of meeting; some of them argue that in their neighbourhoods there are no adequate spaces to meet and that the square is the place where they can find young people from different regions, which makes possible to meet new people and make new friendships. This stage of the work was fundamental to understand the context of the occupation and decisive for the elaboration of the final argument of the film.



Fig. 3. The teenagers in the square. Frame from the documentary video. Images by Maria J. S. Martins and Luciana S. Roça.

During our field research, we notice shared isolation among the groups. The belonging and appropriation of the square denote both a moment of being together in small groups but, still, isolated from the others who are out of the group. The specific behaviour, clothes, music, walking in small groups, drinking, affective encounters are welcomed in this temporary territory, suspending established social rules. The territory is marked by its use and by who perform it. Admittedly, it generates conflicts by their presence, making the surrounding inhabitants uncomfortable. Then, this reinforces the argument in which the police act to protect the public space and the wellbeing of the surrounding inhabitants. The collective listening strengthens the ephemeral territory but is also part of the moral argument since the sound is a disturbance for those who do not fit in this territory.

In the post-production, we revisited the images and the audios. Trying to interpret this appropriation, from a perspective closer to the teenagers' point of view, we decided to assume that we are out of these groups, looking at them. Otherwise, more time would be needed to strengthen relationships with the people who go to the square weekly. The resulting video states a point of view in which we, the researchers and documentarists, are out of this group, by the position of the camera. We, as outsiders of this group, assume our difficult position in this territory by the camera.

The process of conception, accomplishment and finalisation of the documentary was a reflexive process, full of questionings. Acting on the border of this refuge established by the youth enabled us to comprehend the dynamics better and to question ourselves, the place of the researcher on making assertions. This blurry border is a locus of conflict and, at the same time, of communication. In performing the documentary, there was not only a process of looking at the situation and context; making documentary has also become a look at ourselves before the world as researchers. Then, it is not only a matter of gathering information on this event to analyse it, but it is also a matter on how to perceive forms of interpretation and perception, as in a reflexive practice, given that the documentary is an assertion of what happens in a particular situation.

4 Gathering together in public spaces: on collective listening and its ephemeral territories

The sound reproduction of music by loudspeakers, resulting in collective listening in public spaces, is not a novelty in many regions of the world. It may be on the sidewalk of a bar, the stores announcing special offers and playing music aloud, someone playing music on the mobile phone without earphones in the streets. Despite that, the context of our event is fruitful to bring into discussion the tensions and power relations reinforced by collective listening in public spaces, on how music allied to social practice and context can form temporary territories and expose its tensions and limits.

A common sound environment may characterise the collective listening for a group of people; it is the opposite of individual listening, such as the one enabled by headphones. Collective listening is a sound environment which establishes a common ground among the listeners, which can be listened attentively or not. It may invite people to participate within a determined event or not since it addresses cultural value to the activity.

Collective listening may be or not elaborated by sound reproductions and other technological mediation. Evidently, the more intense the sound, the broader is the area affected by these sounds and, consecutively, more difficult if for someone of not being part of the activities. In our case, collective listening is intentionally formed by a group using sound reproduction, the speakers in the cars. The collective listening in the events of the square is a transformation on the current sound environment, adding cultural and social values to the activity. By doing that, the music aids to build an ephemeral territory in the square.

It changes the sound environment of who have the intention to participate, dance and listening what is played, but also changes the sound environment of other communities, pervading physical barriers that mark a difference from the home/street, to what is a shared and collective space and a private one.

In our study, we understand that the matter of collective listening of music in public spaces is beyond that of leisure activities. It reinforces a symbolic territory and dominance over the geographical location and is one of the few opportunities of these people to play dominance over the city's space. On the other hand, this claim to take part in the city's public life and to occupy public spaces is temporary ownership that excludes who is different from the formed group. This point and counterpoint, between us and the others, appropriation and disturbance, is also a reflection on the socio-spatial segregation of the city and how it is reproduced in its public spaces.

Beyond that, Brazilian funk is marginalised, often regarded as a minor musical genre, and it is also frequently portrayed in media as a subculture permeated by drug trafficking [14]. For that, the listeners of this genre are also taken as uncultured by the dominant discourse. These stigmas reinforce a territorial relationship elaborated by the teenagers and their conflicts with surrounding inhabitants and police. The events provide a duality between a cycle of agency and invitation to join the party, the ones who gather in the square, and the disturbance and the pervasion of their personal space, i.e. the neighbourhood, is inherent of the characteristics of sound. Some legislation on sound and activities in cities are a reflection on these issues, also influencing on what we consider as noise [15].

The collective listening helps an appropriation of the public space by a group, forming borders, an inside, together with the group, and an outside, areas where the others are tolerated. The structures of physical space also reinforce these outside areas, such as the street. Nevertheless, in our case, collective listening invigorates the dualities between public and private space: on the one hand, the group takes temporary ownership of the square, transforming it in a temporary private space; on the other hand, the walls of the surrounding private residential properties are not sufficient to restrain sound. By considering sound as a phenomenon that influences our apprehension of the space, it may form territories with porous borders and limits.

The collective listening is part of the significant transformation on the way of interacting in public spaces since it denotes a conviviality among equals, people and groups that share the same preferences or sense of belonging. Collective listening, as in our case study, also implies territories and power relations among people, groups, institutions, law, and economic and political forces.

The collective listening builds up an ephemeral territory with a blurry boundary, and by the very characteristics of sound, it is also a disturbance for those who do not participate or not want to take part of the activities, since sound can pervade spaces considered public or private. Moreover, the stigmas of funk also add cultural and social value to the activity, reinforcing the territorial aspect of the event.

5 Findings

The documentary methods are useful to approach a perspective, as immersion and as an investigation to comprehend other worldviews. As a non-neutral representation, an interpretation, the process of a documentary video invites the researcher to be in the thin line of the observed territory. The documentary can aid the researcher to approach a specific way of life or situation, as some urban anthropologists already did. Furthermore, the documentary, as an assertion of the historical world [3], invites the researcher to be continually questioning its perspectives and statements, demanding a posture. There are ethical questions; historical and social contextualization; the sensibilization towards the approached issues; to comprehend and form the assertions by the combination of images and sounds.

The documentary proved to be a useful way of approximation and immersion on these issues to understand the formation of this practised territory. Furthermore, a documentary carries fruitful methods and proposes situations to discuss the urban problems, which may be convenient to many knowledge areas such as urbanism, architecture, history, cultural studies, social sciences, and others.

A symbolic territory and appropriation are given due to the conditions people give ephemerally to this public space. The square becomes a fleeting territory of shared isolation, suspending established rules and enabling their own, designating what is acceptable or not for the group. The actions and dynamics of the teenagers resignify the given built space of the square, but at the same time this marginalised community is appropriating a public space, paradoxically they exclude the others too, resulting in conflicts.

The music reproduction, resulting in a collective listening, influences this symbolic territory and tensions the limits of it: while the collective listening is a matter of a constructed identity and belonging to these groups, it also tensions the blurry borders of this territory since the neighbourhood understand it as a disturbance.

Collective listening is enabled by sound technologies of reproduction for almost a century, changing forms of appropriation of public spaces and influencing its dynamics. The

study of different activities performing collective listening, the modalities of appropriation of public spaces by sound technologies compose a future subject of research.

The collective listening is a perspective to study the transformation on how people interact in public spaces since it denotes ephemeral territories and power relations between people, institutions, and other groups, and not only social forces but also political and economic ones. Beyond that, collective listening also denotes a conviviality among equals, people and groups that share the same preferences or sense of belonging.

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