

Deslocações and Documentary Poetics: Memories within Images and Words

Alfredo Brant

Catholic University of Portugal

alfredobrant@gmail.com

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When I started the photographic project *Deslocações* (Displacements) in 2018, I was driven by my concerns with the practice of documentary photography. As a photographer working mainly with portraits, I have been interested in the relational space in which a transient relationship between the photographer and the model takes place. I believe that this in-between space can tell as much about the photographer as about the other. However, as my photographic work progressed, I realized that this space of exchange is mostly favoring the photographer. This is especially evident when it comes to a subject undergoing the fractures of Brazilian society, such as poverty, exclusion, and exploitation. I suggest that in the majority of cases, the photographer is in a position of superiority – in terms of socio-economic power – in comparison to the person photographed within documentary practices.

From this dilemma, I started to consider how to represent the practices of seeing the world, but from the perspective of the person being photographed. The challenge is not only to show how a person sees the world, but above all, “how a person makes that world visible” (Robertson et al. 2016). Indeed, the sense of gaze alone is not enough to make a world visible. The visibility afforded by cultural objects is embedded within many senses, dealing with desires, dreams, and all the affects stimulated by different sensorial perceptions. Thus, it calls for a more immersive relation with the subject as a way to include perspectives which are not immediately visible.

Deslocações explores the universe of domestic workers in the megalopolis of São Paulo (Brazil). Initially, my objective was to give visibility to these women’s place in society. The working conditions of domestic workers in Brazil can be extremely terrible. Brazilian cultural heritage is to a large extent based on a form of enslavement and these women constantly face exploitative at work, alongside humiliation, and harassment. The issue seldom takes place in

social debates in Brazil, since their position in society is naturalized and accepted as the normal pattern, often times veiled under a complacent gaze.

In their routines, domestic workers act in private spaces, taking care of an intimate place that does not belong to them. Living in the suburbs of São Paulo, they endure long and painful journeys from home to their workplace. Most of them migrate at a very young age from the Northeast regions of Brazil, fleeing poverty and seeking a better life. Thus, the idea of displacement underlines many aspects of these women's lives. Taking these particularities as guidelines, the project was thought out in three distinct phases. In the first, the participants of the project were photographed in their workplace. I asked how they would like to be represented in their workplace and photographed them accordingly. In the next step, they were invited to photograph their long daily displacements on public transport using their own mobile phones. In the last stage, they shared audio-memories from the time they lived in the North of Brazil, mainly through WhatsApp audio messages, which were collected, transcribed, and edited. These texts are currently being used in the ongoing stage of this project for the creation of poems through techniques of interactive computer poetry generation³¹.

Based on different ideas of displacement – social, geographic, and temporal - through the locations where these women transit, I did a collaborative documentary project that took the form of a photographic journal (Brant 2019). The project *Deslocações* proposes a glance over the domestic workers' cosmos in the city of São Paulo and the relations these women establish with three different spaces: their work environment, the city, and their memories. I used montage techniques to link these three layers of documentation and to stimulate dialogues between them. The process reveals new readings that are not evident in each record taken separately. They evoke an expanded documentary experience which connects the informative potential of images with the reality experienced by these women.

For the first two spaces, the contrast between the staged portraits in someone else's private space and the urban blurred images made with mobile phones – depicting public transport, faraway suburban neighborhoods, and the abstract fuzziness of the urban circulation – insinuates a huge social gap between these women and their employers. It also suggests how one's urban experience is affected by economic and social conditions. In fact, the long displacement from the poorest zones of the city to the richest areas is a significant aspect of these women's lives. As

³¹ On the traditions of interactive poetry generation, see Roque (2011).

frequently mentioned during our conversations, they spend an important amount of their time in daily commute, which can sometimes reach up to four hours.

The third layer – the one related to their memories – has turned into a separate piece of work, which I am currently working on, and which will be incorporated in a second edition of the photographic journal. Relying on the concept of *imagetext*³² (Mitchell 1995), we can consider these audio-memories as acoustic images. They are immaterial images that I transferred to a material support (texts) to create a perceptual zone, attesting that images can be both material and immaterial entities, migrating from medium to medium (McNamara 2017). I have created a series of poetic objects by analyzing the themes underlying each of the domestic workers audio-memories. Through a process of textual montage, I employed techniques such as juxtapositions, modifications, reselections, and suppressions to give a textual shape to those immaterial images.

This approach is significant for the project. To depict someone's world relying only on the visual/textual perspective of the artist might not be enough. To adequately translate how someone makes their own world visible, it is necessary to recall subjective representations such as autobiographical narratives. Through the representation of memories, one can also understand how someone makes a world visible. Memories are not subjected to a technical control of a medium, they are a truly subjective space (Bruner 1991). They are not spared from external social and political events, but they filter them into a very personal form of creating meaning.

Since I am appropriating the words of other people to build a new object, the main challenge is to enhance these subjective fragments in order to create a coherent discourse. As I quickly realized, the memories are heavily laden with visual elements. In their testimonies, close contact with nature³³, detailed space description, singular objects, folk traditions, particular events, and routines are reported in an emotional – sometimes nostalgic – tone. The narratives are focused at local singularities of their past countryside lives, but at the same time they also point to more universal impressions. For instance, the struggle against social conditions, the 'economic diaspora', childhood imagination, and their close relation with religious events are themes

³² The idea of vision blending with other senses has led Mitchell to coin the term of *imagetext*, where the visual experiences are considered as a composite construction, owing its singularity from different media. *Imagetext* is an artifact of communication between human that is "fundamental and widespread as language", but "not reducible to or explicable on the model of language" (Mitchell 542).

³³ Out of the 18 photographed women, 16 have spent their childhood or adolescence in small villages in the countryside of Northeast Brazil.

iterating throughout the stories. In any case, the memories are vivid, colorful and evocative of a very singular spatiality that is no longer recordable. During our message exchanges, when I asked Norma³⁴ if she had a picture of her childhood, I received the direct answer: “Of course not! We were poor and at that time we had not access to any kind of camera”.

Indeed, the majority of these women have no record of their childhood. If any, they have been lost. When pictures are no longer accessible or have been destroyed, the recall of a latent spatiality can bring the past to the fore, promoting the extension from experiences to knowledge. Such an approach is also used by contemporary discussions around spatiality where the notion of place is dependent on practices and subjective experiences. The notion of space is challenged not only as the exact geographic location of an event, but as a place which is shaped by social interactions and by each person’s perception thereof.

Deslocações allowed me to develop a concept that I am calling *documentary poetics* and points to innovative strategies in the discipline of visual literacy. Such a concept is an attempt to connect texts and images as two interdependent representational systems, with none having any hierarchical position over the other. I apply *documentary poetics* to my photographic project when I connect types of knowledge arising from the images (such as the political, the aesthetic, and the cultural), with other texts (personal memories and sensorial experiences). Here, it seeks to absorb the meaning and enhance the visual potential of the domestic workers’ memories as a form of reality perception.

It is important to point out that this project is an ongoing experimental effort. Once it is concluded, both the poetic objects and the photographs taken will be placed side by side on the printed pages of the second edition of the photographic journal. With that, I expect to establish a poetic dialogue between different sorts of documents. Accordingly, such *documentary poetics* would help to dilate the irreducible time of photographs. Without contextualization, photographs always point to a past reality that is enclosed in itself and cannot be transformed or updated. To expand the significance of photography, I offer multiple layers of interpretation for these images. In the case of *Deslocações*, they are afforded by the poetic objects that complement the gaps in the portraits with personal memories. Furthermore, the participative practices add the women’s subjective perception of the city, thus including yet another element of contextualization.

³⁴ Born in Ilhéus (Bahia), Norma is one of eighteen women who participated in the project.

Documentary poetics is a concept under construction, and I believe it can be helpful for reading images with cultural awareness, as well as be a tool to renew image production practices. Therefore, the findings point to some directions for the development of the concept: 1. As a strategy of extracting knowledge from images which does not emerge only from their visible content and their aesthetic form, but also from the surrounding context in which images were produced and from the memories and personal experiences of the subject; 2. Towards more collective acts within visual practices, where everyone – photographer, subject, audience – participates in the construction of meaning; 3. Adopting alterity as an ethical strategy to foster cultural production through intersubjective and participatory practices, where the articulation of the self with the other represents a space beyond the authority of the artistic ego; 4. Considering that the document bears descriptive features, but also a poetic potential of connecting memories with reality.

Finally, the results of the photographic project open up the notion of *documentary poetics* to an array of different applications. As a contribution to visual literacy, it offers ways of employing visual practices to interconnect words and images. However, the scope of the concept is more ambitious since it aims to raise knowledge that is subjective and political at the same time. I believe that this is granted by the nature of the relation established between the artist/researcher and their object. What I accomplished with this experiment was a real engagement with the domestic workers' lives and histories, not only in terms of information, but also on a subjective and political level. To achieve this, I quite literally let the subject of my project speak. This might be a useful reflection on the ways to relate with our topics of interest, whether in an artistic project or an academic one.











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