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On memory beyond the facts: The fictional as an aesthetic resource in 'Stalker' and 'Act of Killing'

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ABSTRACT

*This study explores the interconnectedness of memory studies and fiction as an aesthetic resource, forming a significant area within artistic studies. The analysis focuses on the anthropological representation of memory in two films: Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, situated within the Soviet realism movement depicting the post-World War II social, political, and economic crisis of the Soviet Union, and Joshua Oppenheimer's *Act of Killing*, a 2012 meta-documentary portraying a contemporary geopolitical context concerning individuals engaged in the military occupation initiated in Indonesia in 1959. The examination reveals the pervasive role of fiction as an effective aesthetic*

*resource in representing historical contexts. Both films, *Stalker* and *Act of Killing*, emphasize the necessity of conveying a nuanced perception of memory to the audience. Furthermore, within the cinematic language of memory work, fiction emerges as an indispensable testimony to the director's creative efforts, serving as an intermediary force that transcends specific spatiotemporal contexts and broadens awareness of geopolitical phenomena beyond their representative and factual confines.*

KEYWORDS: *Trauma, Cinema, Memory, Documentary.*

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The role of the artist on representing historical phenomena through aesthetic resources is, in the first place, analogous to any manifestation of artistic nature. Whether through the evidence of technical elements that allows us to chronologically place a work in a spatiotemporal context where the use of more specific technologies highlights (artistic) trends, institutions, artists, or simply through the incorporation of thematic, plastic, and aesthetic trends. Given that, a work of art can situate the context in which it was created, even in a more abstract way through resources associated with their respective artistic languages. Is the pursuit of an exact replication of reality the absolute solution for the viewer to approach the elements and objects represented in an aesthetic manifestation? The answer is: no. This answer had already been given to us in different historical contexts of various artistic languages, for “mental representation does not imply similarity to material reality; similarity is not found through simulation” (DIAS, 1994, p. 99).

In the case of the seventh art, the first wave of Cinema *Verité*¹ became the first cinematic expression that showed us, with various examples, that aesthetic resources go beyond what would be considered a mere exposition of scientific facts. This work aims to illustrate how the so-called memory studies² are interconnected with the fictional as an aesthetic resource, and thus constitute a field of research in the area of artistic studies because it demonstrates that the fictional as an artistic practice allows migrations at the level of perception: between different geopolitical contexts and the viewer, thus showing that the use of fiction establishes a homogeneity of temporal action, dissociated from a specific film genre, the era in which the film is produced and released, its producers, and their respective technical resources. In this case, the idea is to understand the similarities at the level of the anthropological representation of memory present in two films: “Stalker,” belonging to the wave of Soviet realism, made in 1979 from a literary fiction³ where the social, political, and economic crisis of post-World War II Soviet Union is portrayed in an episode featuring the character named Stalker, who escorts a professor and a writer to the “Zone,” an area forbidden by the army; and “Act of Killing,” a meta-documen-

¹ Documentary film style invented by Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch, inspired by the cinematography of Dziga Vertov and the concept of “kino-pravda” promoted by him.

² The so-called “memory studies” emerge in the academic context due to a “great interest in the question of memory through images, whether still or in motion, of a documentary nature.” (CATALÀ, Josep. “Montage and figuration” in *Figures of (collective) memory: documentaries as palaces of memory* (2018), São Paulo: Electronic Journal of the Master’s Program in Communication at Faculdade Cásper Líbero, p. 173)

³ The film “Stalker” is the result of the cinematic adaptation of the book “Roadside Picnic,” released in 1972 by the brothers Arkadi and Boris Strugatsky.

tary released in 2012 that portrays a contemporary geopolitical context about individuals who participated in the military occupation initiated in Indonesia in 1959 by the ultranationalist *Pancasila Youth*⁴ group, marked by genocide against the communist population, carried out between 1965 and 1966. Both filmmakers, Andrei Tarkovsky and Joshua Oppenheimer, demonstrate with these films through the aesthetics of cinema, an audiovisual representation of fear and trauma analogous to these respective geopolitical contexts, the psychological and behavioral consequences of communities repressed by these historical phenomena, using the aesthetic languages of cinema to convey a perceptual experience to the viewer, allowing them to reflect on these spatiotemporal contexts represented by an aesthetic environment that evokes through filmic representation, a phenomenological spectrum of a dystopian atmosphere where terror dominates a lost time, invoking in this loss a repression regarding the sociocultural consequences resulting from these military actions transmitted through cinematic composition.

On Fear and Trauma

Documentary cinema has become the cinema that evolved from Cinema Verité, mostly associated with a filmmaking style whose arrangement/editing aimed to provide the viewer with the most concrete answers regarding a thematic context, given its documentary focus and improvisational technique. However, it is evident that a fictional film, even based on true events, can convey sensations, regrets, and fear, as seen in films addressing the post-war theme indirectly, such as Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979). Positioned within the wave of Soviet realism, it belongs to a group of filmmakers who managed to expose, through aesthetic language, some psychological remnants of the post-war period: the memory of fear and trauma. To discuss these phenomena in the context of film production, we must understand their origins to direct their premises towards a more compact analysis of these two terms whose theoretical core belongs to psychology: memory and fear. In his book *Portugal, Hoje* addressing the social and behavioral consequences of the Salazarist regime in Portugal before the 1974 revolution, José Gil indicates that there is indeed something in memory that reflects in contemporary social and political praxis. Although *Act of Killing* and *Stalker* situate themselves in distinct geopolitical contexts, and even in the Portuguese context, there are several similarities regarding the perception of what can be called the memory of fear and trauma. Concerning fear, José Gil refers two points in the development of psychoanalysis, explaining that despite

⁴ Military body still in force today, operating in partnership with the government of Indonesia.

the proximity of the terms - fear and terror - there is a slight difference that allows us to outline aspects to understand how the interplay between the film and the viewer acquires a specific perception for each of these two phenomena. "It is useful to distinguish fear from terror. According to Freud, fear is characterized by knowledge of its object, contrary to anxiety. But... with Ferenczi, we also attribute to terror the ignorance of its object" (GIL, 2007, p. 107). Further in the same essay, José Gil revisits a study by Ferenczi to retain a description "regarding 'psychic trauma': 'this suppresses the perception of its causes, not even inscribing itself in the unconscious; and leaves the individual completely defenseless, at the mercy of any pressure or influence'" (GIL, 2007, p. 108).

Memory in Stalker

The memory evoked in *Stalker* originates from a literary representation of a post-war context. In 1979, based on *Roadside Picnic*, Andrei Tarkovsky produced his film adaptation, the last film he made in the Soviet Union. The book presents us with "more incidents, characters, and digressions, and unlike the film, unfolds over a period of years" (FANU, 2017); this process is common to all film adaptations created from a preceding narrative, whether through plastic transfers between respective artistic languages or the aesthetic intent aimed at composing a homogeneous artistic exposition. Thus, the focus should be primarily on the most abstract and present element, both in the book and its film adaptation; in this case, we must consider that the "essential vision of the book is dystopian... and certainly, there are various things from the Soviet Union of that time" (FANU, 2017) with that character: primarily the political, social, and economic crises resulting from World War II ending in 1945, the subsequent Cold War with the United States beginning in 1947, and the decline of Stalinism in 1953. In these terms, creativity must resort to a language of symbols to extrapolate the limits imposed by the spatiotemporal distance of these historical phenomena. Corbin, concerning the language of symbols, talks about his thesis regarding his imaginal world, which "relates to an infinite reality that surpasses all attempts at intellectual reduction. Corbin... even distances himself from the word 'imaginary'" (MENDONÇA, 2005, p. 28). However, between Corbin's thesis and Andrei Tarkovsky's work, there is a distinction mentioned by Kátia Mendonça regarding the production of the imaginary:

"In Corbin, rational and reducing thought... lodges in allegory, while the symbol is inexhaustible in its meaning and composes the imaginal world. In Tarkovsky, the terminology is different, and the inexhaustibility of supersensible reality will be an

attribute of the image, with the symbol having the function that allegory has in Corbin” (MENDONÇA, 2005, p. 30).

The images in Andrei Tarkovsky’s cinema present the tension between two typologies of filmic time that Maria Irene Aparício refers to, explaining the convergence between the artistic aspect as perpetuator of human memory and nature as an element of absorption/elimination of memory traces.

“The continuous tension between art that perpetuates human memory and nature that erases traces of memory is thus the central question of *Stalker*, *Zerkalo*, and *Offret*. The images of these films are screens (mirrors, perhaps) of convergence between two times: the extra-filmic (urban time that refers to society, to man among men, ultimately restoring a form of historical memory) and the intra-filmic time metaphorized by the prevalence of nature’s marks, the revelation of a dilated and ‘invisible,’ almost infinite time, a vortex where all the memory that man seeks to record and remember plunges” (APARÍCIO, 2011, p. 6).

These aesthetic properties in “*Stalker*” demonstrate how, through the use of fiction, cinema can work on memory, defining cinematographic language as a “privileged territory of heterotopias and heterochronies; spaces and times that are simultaneously in physical space and time but also outside of them” (APARÍCIO, 2011, p. 3).

Vision and Phenomenology

The possibilities of cinema enable the creation of sensations through fixed audiovisual sequences, and these perceptual proposals by the language of cinema allow us to revisit Merleau-Ponty’s thesis in which the phenomenology of the visible finds a point of intersection between the audiovisual montage of cinema and the spectator.

“In Merleau-Ponty, the senses do not merely have the status of an organ; the visible, in turn, is not reducible to objectification, and visibility is not convertible to the seen or visibility, as it does not restrict itself to apprehension by sight. Seeing does not constitute an exclusive attribute of human morphology. Vision and visibility spread throughout reality, participating in and forming itself in its constitutive ontogenetic reversibility. In this regard, vision is the phenomenization of the visible or continuous articulation and differentiation between the visible and the invisible” (DIAS, 1994, p. 282).

So, as Margarida Medeiros speaks of photography as a narrative element of literary fiction aiming to make an impression on the behavior and psychology of characters, the same applies to the resources of cinematic creation concerning the viewer when both come together. Considering that a phenomenological transfer occurs at that moment, enhanced by the fictional resources of cinema: “the body (in terms of vision) thus reiterates itself as a place of marks, material where, involuntarily, trauma is imprinted” (MEDEIROS, 2012, p. 100). The existentialist philosophy⁵ of the 1940s (Sartre, Camus, Heidegger) influences artists dealing with issues in the post-World War II period, as these philosophies focus on the problematization of “a kind of pain linked to the so-called ‘existential experience’ and human failure in the face of its relationship with the other and with finite reality” (ARRIFANO, 2015, p. 170). To understand representation in the context of cinema, we must go back to a nuclear field of artistic analysis: mimesis. Regarding mimesis, Fernando Gil distinguishes four aspects of the representation:

“(a) representativity, as representation is a meaningful content that replaces the represented, the external object; (b) informative content, since affection transmits to the soul the properties of the perceived object; (c) an efficacy of the exterior, and (d) a deciphering apparatus, in the soul, which is studied in detail for each sense... ‘Pain’ ceases to be the sign of difference demarcating perception and perceived” (GIL, 1984, p. 53).

In the migration from the philosophical field to the artistic field regarding the study of representation, we can distinguish the role of aesthetic impregnation as an element that encodes a memory so that it can be transmitted to the spectrum of external action (the viewer), making that memory come alive to enhance historical contexts, even through abstract or fictional representations, because in the

“construction, the being, the truth, the cause - converge. Its elucidation is primarily psychological, encoding in the strict sense: how perception registers and identifies similarities and regularities, what are the levels of complexity in the treatment of information. The problem of encoding is an integral part of the theory of representation” (GIL, 1984, p. 81).

These philosophical theories that focus on the study of representation in the abstract sense, demonstrate that the use of fiction as an aesthetic element in cinema

⁵ Existentialism is a term applied to a school of philosophers from the 19th and 20th centuries who, despite profound differences in doctrines, shared the belief that philosophical thought begins with the human subject, not merely the thinking subject, but also their actions, feelings, and the experiences of an individual human being. (MACQUARRIE, John “Existentialism” (1972) New York, p. 14–15. Available at <https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Existencialismo>, last accessed on January 13, 2021.)

results in a concrete awareness of the problems constituted in the plot of a film. In cinematic representation, there is an intention to convey a feeling of reaction to the images generated in a film work. In the scope of this transmitting power that the aesthetic and sociological elements of audiovisual nature have on the viewer, Mariana Silva explains that:

for “Comolli⁶ (2018), the nature of realism in cinema consists of a style, a spirit, and a system of writing that make the spectacle acquire the relevance of life itself, especially in situations marked by traumas or collective destructions, which result in a loss of meaning experienced by individuals. When this violence reaches its climax, the spectacle tends to thicken as a mechanism for recognizing its own unacceptability” (SILVA, 2016, p. 1-2).

Thus, it is in spectacularity that cinema acquires mechanisms of symbolic language, thus performing a process of awareness in the viewer. The viewer recognizes in exaggeration and fictional visualities an aesthetic intention that conveys a message whose goal is precisely to demonstrate that the dystopian scenarios resulting from military actions can exceed the expectations of what are the hypotheses of human action and thought.

Fictional and Factual Memory in Documentary Cinema

What place do cinema images occupy in a visual montage where fiction brings us closer to a historical truth that does not rely on facts? How do aesthetic resources serve as a bridge for an experiential gaze rather than merely presenting images that aim to situate a historical phenomenon and a set of ideological views related to the agents of that phenomenon?

In *Stalker*, characters are created from literary fiction, while in *Act of Killing*, the creation of characters is shown in real-time. Català, regarding memory devices, refers to three typologies within the structure of *Act of Killing* that encompasses the intersection between cinematic exposure of factual elements and staged elements belonging to the realm of aesthetic expression:

“Documentary memory extracted directly from reality. Illustrative memory in which the document is secondary, constructed on a primary reality with imaginative touches of expressive character. Memory that mixes reality and fiction, com-

⁶ Jean-Louis Comolli (1941) was a French writer, editor, and film director.

binning real spaces with imaginary spaces, corresponding to subjective, unconscious memory, or, more precisely, forms in which memory can be unconsciously modified by the subject” (CATALÀ, 2018, p. 182).

In *Act of Killing* (2012) by Joshua Oppenheimer, surrealism is used to surpass mere visual accuracy, revealing the psychological side of the people being filmed. The intentional use of fiction in the realm of documentary cinema transcends thematic and genre classifications, emphasizing the unique construction of an artistic work that provides access to a reality no longer fully recoverable by the viewer. In *Act of Killing*:

the documentary nature focuses not only on the recording of the genocide as a historically situated event but also on the recording of the structuring fantasies of a particular truth of the subjects involved in violence, refractory to any logical explanation (SILVA, 2016, p. 5).

Anwar Congo⁷ is chosen by Joshua Oppenheimer to represent the phantasmagoric character of the geopolitical context of Indonesia in complicity with the genocides of 1965-1966. The construction of a main character associated with the aesthetic message intended by the filmmaker is similar to the construction of the Stalker figure. In *Stalker*:

Stalker establishes himself not only as the physical and spiritual guide for characters entering the Zone but also as the emotional guide for viewers, becoming the main character through whom our reactions and feelings converge, determining the latent purpose transmitted by the city and the Zone in the film’s narrative (ROYO, 1979, p. 19-20).

The registration of fantasies created from historical phenomena is only possible through a process of signification of audiovisual elements. These elements serve as transfer devices for the remnants of a reality beyond its representation. According to Gilles Deleuze, certain signs force us to think about lost time, the passage of time, the annulment of what happened, and the alteration of beings. There are signs that promote the awareness of the self about itself (ARRIFANO, 2015, p. 169). The feeling of loss is analogous to any aesthetic representation, inscribing an awareness of the inexorable passage of time. It is an aspect of cinema whose *mise-en-scene* is done

⁷ Former member of Pancasila Youth who, among several interviews and recordings conducted by Joshua Oppenheimer during his shoots in Indonesia, stands out and is chosen to be the protagonist of the film for his complicit character, but also for his naivety. This ambivalence fits effectively into Joshua Oppenheimer’s cinematographic objective regarding the construction of a character based on his psychological and behavioral fragility.

with the central purpose of conveying a represented memory of a historical phenomenon, converging the filmic language into an audiovisual homogenization conveying the anthropological necessity of highlighting the loss of a unique universe (ARRIFANO, 2015, p. 171). Regarding fiction in the field of documentary cinema, it might be considered an aesthetic deviation compromising the unity of the audiovisual message in relation to the geopolitical context represented in the film. Instead, it infers perceptual amplitude in the viewer and enhances the film's homogeneity. Thus, we can speak of 'fictional' in the same way Gerard Lenne speaks of the 'fantastic' as a "vast set of contours impossible to delimit except in the field of meaning" (LENNE, 1985, p. 135). In this regard, there is an intersection between the fictional and reality where artistic practice, transposed into an object of aesthetic nature, gains a prominent place:

credibility, situated beyond criteria of verisimilitude or plausibility, becomes crucial. It requires the audience to 'believe in it,' to have the most accurate possible reconstruction of a universe that is not a copy of the existing world but a meeting ground between the imaginary and the real—a poetic place (LENNE, 1985, p. 18).

This poetic place, which is the realm of fiction as an artistic resource, constitutes a crossover space between the work and the spectator, where the artwork reveals its potency in its aesthetic exposition of a representation of a context delineated by the audiovisual and narrative structure of the film. The reflection and emotion that cinema proposes materialize in an action of transition between the film's universe and the spectator's universe, activating a game where the idea of a transitional area established by Winnicott is effectively applied:

"In cinema, the author selects fragments from various sociocultural discourses that interest him from the 'real world' and creates the film using the act of pretending, that is, the intention to build a world in another reality. This intentionality is located in the transitional area, which allows the intersection between the real and the imaginary, as it is the place where the artist transforms the fields of reference from the world of meanings into the material of his manifestation and realizes the imaginary as a condition of its representability" (SPINELLI, 2000, p. 53).

Consequently, in this transition, the spectator, "through their cultural knowledge and critical procedures of transformation and rupture, creates mechanisms of projection onto the film, being able to have a more or less complex identification with the narrative, establishing the real on new levels" (SPINELLI, 2000, p. 54).

In *Act of Killing*, the cinematic montage presents two resources that Joshua Oppenheimer uses to establish a view of the documented individuals, enabling them to

transition through cinema into the condition of characters. This aesthetic phenomenon surpasses factual information as a representation of an absolute reality: the non-chronological sequence of images captured during fieldwork, aiming to show the psychological development of the filmed agents in which a homogeneous unit of representativeness is established through filmic composition—a process of fragmentation whose intention, regarding the psychological image of these agents, resembles the visual composition in *Stalker*: “one of the effects of fragmentation is the problem of mobility and its striking presence in the city, a mechanism used most prominently by Tarkovsky to indicate the feeling of transit and instability in the city of the film” (ROYO, 2017, p. 21). Secondly, the staging of surrealistic scenes in the form of a meta-documentary, in which the deliberate recording of these staging processes is presented to induce in the former agents a camouflaged reminiscence of their acts, allowing collaboration and passive awareness in a process of defamiliarization as a technical and aesthetic resource simultaneously. Català explains this process as follows:

“The familiar becomes sinister, and its reverse appears: ‘defamiliarization’ is a form of figurative disassembly by which the image itself transforms into a reverse that reveals its hidden face. This process is divided into two parts: on the one hand, the sinister that emanates from the making of the image itself, and on the other, the distancing effect that allows us to understand the reach of this sinister condition that emerges from the newly discovered abyss” (CATALÀ, 2018, p. 176).

In this regard, the spectacular nature provides the spectator with a reflective ambiance of a space that encompasses a set of elements common to various historical phenomena characterized and situated in a perceptual and phenomenological homogeneity. This is because the “spectacle operates... by a kind of derealization and, at the same time, by a redirection of the real to the scene, making it assimilable and claiming for itself a status of authenticity” (SILVA, 2016, p. 1). These psychological exposures aim to establish, through representation, an anthropological panorama regarding ways of acting in society and the world—a concept that Marc Augé retrieves from the preface of the first volume of Pierre Nora’s *Lieux de mémoire* to explain the difficulties historians face in transferring the principles of intelligibility and identity of time to contemporaneity:

“What we seek in the religious accumulation of testimonies, documents, images, all the ‘visible signs of what was’... is our difference, and ‘in the spectacle of this difference, the sudden gleam of an unattainable identity. No longer a genesis but the deciphering of what we are considering what we no longer are” (AUGÉ, 2007, p. 25).

Conclusion

The analysis reveals the omnipresence of the fictional element as an effective aesthetic tool that permeates the representation of historical contexts in films such as *Stalker* and *Act of Killing*. Both, even belonging to different cinematographic genres and addressing distinct realities, share the need to convey a perception to the viewer through a work on memory. In the language of cinema, the treatment of memory always involves fiction as an irreducible testimony to the filmmaker's creative work. This creativity acts as an intermediary force between a specific spatio-temporal context and the ability to broaden awareness of a geopolitical phenomenon, transcending the limits of truthful representation. The application of fiction in representing reality gives the viewer an expanded perceptual spectrum, showing that aesthetic practice is a tool for exposing and amplifying lost, distant, or fragmented memories. Through artistic creation, fiction becomes a power that transcends representational boundaries, offering a new phenomenological understanding of reality. In summary, the analysis highlights how cinema, by employing fiction in approaching historical contexts, not only presents a version of reality but also becomes a form of artistic expression that challenges and transcends the boundaries between the factual and the imaginary, between representation and experience. This process reveals the complexity of memory and its reconstruction, providing a profound reflection on the nature of cinematic representation and its ability to influence historical understanding.

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