



Documentary, history and memory: between places and the media “of memory”

Documentário, história e memória: entre os lugares e as mídias “de memória”



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Abstract: the objective of this study is to establish some premises for the understanding of the documentary and its relationship with History and memory, choosing the historical documentary as the object of analysis for presenting connections with the historical discourse. Considering the documentary as a place and media “of memory” leads us to problematize it as the object of instrumentalizations (or connections) of memories and identities aimed at performing a convincing and touching discourse about the past.

Keywords: documentary; history; memories; identities; remembrance.

Resumo: o objetivo deste trabalho é estabelecer algumas premissas para o entendimento do documentário e sua relação com a História e a memória, elegendo o documentário histórico como objeto de análise, por esse apresentar aproximações com o discurso histórico. Ter o documentário como lugar e mídia “de memória” nos leva a problematizá-lo como objeto de instrumentalizações (ou articulações) de memórias e identidades destinadas a colocar em prática um discurso sobre o passado, convincente e comovente.

Palavras-chave: documentário; história, memórias; identidades; recordação.

Introduction

History is in fact the kingdom of the inaccurate. This discovery is not useless; justify the historian. Justifies all his uncertainties. The historical method can only be an inexact method [...]. History wants to be objective and cannot be it. It wants to revive, but i can only reconstruct” (RICOUER apud LE GOFF, 1992, p. 21, our translation).

This study is not about the historical method, but the words of Paul Ricoeur sound to us like a guidance to think History’s relationship with cinema, television, and other audiovisuals. Away from the chains of scientism and the combative critique of history as narrative, the author acknowledges that the historian needs a method, even if inaccurate. Ricoeur believes in the historian as the subject of a “historic doing”, who chases the past with the yearning to revive it, even with the certainty that this shall never be entirely possible. The historian can (and should) be guided by a scientific objectivity, but knows that, inevitably, the craft leads him to resort to interpretation as the analytical key of this past that presents itself only in the form of traces, tracks, and remains. In short, the criticism to documents, which authorizes history as a science, is only possible by way of interpretation. An inherently human activity that enables the historian to exercise constant doubt regarding the document, but that goes beyond determining whether a document is false or authentic. Faced with the realization that “no document is innocent”, the historian’s duty is to disassemble it, demystify it (LE GOFF, 1992, p. 110) so that the past can finally be rebuilt.

It is in this perspective that, since the 1970s, authors such as Marc Ferro turned their attention to cinema, electing the film as another document (or source) for History. In over 40 years, the Cinema-History relationship has traveled a long and challenging way to consolidate itself as a historiographical field. Its methods have been perfected and its theories developed over years of research, but this was not enough to overcome the mistrust. According to Miriam Rossini, in a thesis defended in 1999, it was possible to think that the resistance from a portion of the historiographical field he was linked to three factors:

1. The dispute between an objective knowledge, crossed by reason, and a subjective one, crossed by the sensitivity and symbolism typical of non-verbal languages.
2. A cultural prejudice that saw cinema as a minor art and, therefore, of no relevance as a source of knowledge of society itself.
3. The complexity of the cinematic image, which builds its meanings from the interweaving of various elements, all of different natures. (ROSSINI, 1999, p. 46, our translation)

I believe that today there is less resistance, but it still exists. In the case of the film, the saying that “no document is innocent” is also true, that we can only access its speech about the past if we disassemble it, then reassemble it under the rules of a new sign: the written word. The most threatening characteristic of the film is that it is a metaphorical speech, symbolic *of* and *about* the past, which, in its turn, requires from the historian other tools to approach it.

In addition to this is the view that considers the movie a document to examine it in an inquiring perspective, searching for literal truths concerning the past – or thinking that it is a direct reflection of the History told in books –, it is something already overcome (or at least it is believed so) in the studies of the Cinema-History relationship. The film needs to be respected for what it is, a film. The premise that the History of the 20th century was written by moving images is irrefutable, but it is a History constructed with other rules, as Robert Rosenstone clarifies: “[...] filmmakers (some of them) can be, and are, historians, but, by necessity, *the rules of interaction of their works with the past are, and should be, different from the rules that govern written History*” (ROSENSTONE, 2010, p. 22).

The documentary is as inventive as the fictional film, and worth the saying that every film is historic, i.e., they always dialogue with the present time of their production. According to Rosenstone, there are two ways to face the inventive character of the historical film and its contributions to the knowledge of the past, which apply to fiction and the documentary:

It is possible to consider the contribution of such works in terms not only of the specific details presented by them, but also in the broad sense of the past they convey, the rich images and visual metaphors that they provide for us so that we can think historically. It is also possible to face the historical film as part of a separate representation and discourse field, whose goal is not to provide literal truths about the past (as if our written history was able to), but metaphorical truths that work, in large extent, as a type of commentary and challenge, compared to the traditional historical discourse. (ROSENSTONE, 2010, p. 24, our translation)

The fact that the documentary approaches the historical discourse, to set itself as a rhetorical statement, which must resort to evidentiary mechanisms that may give credibility to the film, as well as moving and convincing the viewer of its assumed arguments on the world presented (NICHOLS, 2005), leads many historians to believe the farce that the documentary gives us direct access to History, that it is able to provide an experience of the past practically without mediation, as Rosenstone

discussed (2010, p. 35-36). It is necessary to recognize that to believe in this farce is dangerous and naive, and little collaborates to the understanding of documentaries as the object of study of History.

According to Rosenstone, “all forms of documentary contain lots of information regarding the past, though some are inclined to macro-historical data, while others to micro-historical ones” (2010, p. 134, our translation). However, I shall focus here on a specific type of documentary. I am interested in the historical documentary because it is inserted “inevitably in the broader historical discourse, that data and debates field surrounding its theme” (ROSENSTONE, 2010, p. 134). Other concepts can be approximated to this one, such as *film-testimony* and *archive film*, but I prefer to consider this kind of documentary under the analytical key of memory, thus resorting to the concept of *documentary of memory*, as proposed by Guy Gauthier: of a film that consists of “[...] a dive into the past through witnesses or through the research of evidences” (2011, p. 213).

The aim of this study is to establish some premise for understanding the documentary and its relationship with history and memory, choosing a form of documentary for analysis that presents forms of enunciation very similar to those of the historical discourse, without losing sight of the notion that historian and documentary filmmaker are guided by different rules and expectations (ROSENSTONE, 2010). When electing the documentary as an object of study of History, we are interested in approaching it less under the safe shelter of its filmic objectivity, inherent in documentary images filled with evidentiary content, and more by the subjectivities developed in these same images. Considering the documentary as a place and media “of memory” leads us to problematize it as the object of instrumentalizations (or connections) of memories and identities aimed at performing a convincing and touching discourse about the past.

The documentary as an object of study of History

The world represented in the film already exists before the camera is placed in front of it. According to Philippe Dubois, the cinema’s camera, or the “images machinery” in general – such as the camera obscura –, are instruments or devices that allow the mediation between the man and the world within a symbolic construction system inherent to representation. In this sense, it is equivalent to say that the image is the product of the encounter of the individual (the director) with the reality. In the documentary, this reality implies the encounter with an

*other*². For Dubois, the film machine is not limited only to producing images, but also generates affection when enhancing the sensations and emotions from a relationship outside the film: the individual, the real, and the other (DUBOIS, 2004, p. 44-45). So, the images-product of these meetings give us access to anything that we didn't have before the contact of the individual-of-camera with real lived: the meanings, the values and the affective experiences with the world.

The biggest danger when reading the documentary is the notion that it is a document that bears witness to the past, when actually it is the product of a process of monumentalization of the past, since the field of representation is also the field of power struggle. The documentary is only a document if read as a monument, a result of the “[...] effort of the historical societies to impose on the future – willingly or unwillingly – a certain image of themselves” (LE GOFF, 1992, p. 548, our translation). The document is the product of choices, including of those who are dedicated to know the past, as in the case of historians. The past only survives in the form of traces, tracks, remains that, by themselves, do not say anything – it is their use by the power that transforms them into monuments. We need to gather the “shards” to have a History. The same happens with the documentary. The filmmaker deals with fragments, with remains of images and sounds from other times, handles testimonies, in order to offer us his vision of the past. His choices determine what should be remembered and forgotten by a collective audiovisual memory, remembering that representation is also a battleground. Thus, as a “document-truth” does not exist, neither does a “documentary-truth”. Not everything is true in a film, as much as it uses indexed images and sounds of the world itself to speak assertively about it³.

However, this finding should not sound here as offensive, nor lead us to associate to the documentary a naive sense of falsehood. We should recognized, in

² It is necessary to point out that even the autobiographical documentary – in which the *ego* of the filmmaker prevails over *them* (the “others” of filmic representation) – does not let go of alterity as a trace of this kind of cinema, as the encounter with an *other* occurs in documentaries always dependent on an ethical writing of the past in the present.

³ About this approach of treating the historical films as part of a process of past monumentalization, from the reading of Le Goff, it is necessary to do justice to studies such as those by Eduardo Morettin, which walk this path when analyzing the fictional films such as *Descobrimento do Brasil* (1937) and *Os Bandeirantes* (1940), both by Humberto Mauro, produced during the regime of president Getúlio Vargas, under the aegis of the *Instituto Nacional de Cinema Educativo* (INCE) [National Institute of Educational Cinema]. In the author's view, these “[...] films of historical representation that have an official character reflect the desire to justify present actions in the light of projections that clarify the past and to guarantee to future generations, through constant exhibitions in different spaces and for many spectators, the effectiveness of the symbolic constructions that make the theme the permanence of its image” (MORETTIN, 2013, p. 23).

the raw material, what was picked up in the heat of events, the result of a subjective perception of the world. A perception that implies an individual that, while guiding the lens from the camera to a certain reality, molds it under his point of view. Moldings that, after, shall be handled and assembled to compose a view of the world or of the past. An operation that, once more, is the product of a subjective perception of the performer-individual. Therefore, dealing with the documentary from the perspective of a construct of reality is to value the human being's capacity to recreate itself, its history, its tradition.

For Le Goff, the historian is responsible for assuming a posture before the document that is not naive, unraveling and demystifying its apparent meanings (1992, p. 548). This becomes even more challenging for those who deal with the documentary, especially if we consider that, in many cases, the raw material of these films are images and sounds previously elected as (historical) documents. Filmmakers do not always question these materials, and also take as true the testimonies of witnesses and even of historians, who, in this case, are presented as institutional voices of a historical knowledge regarding the past event. An example of how the figure of the historian exercises this role of a knowledge institution, in this case History, in historical documentaries or *documentaries of memory* – as I prefer to read this group of films – can be seen in *O Lapa Azul* (Durval Jr., 2007), which tells the stories of former Brazilian combatants who served in Italy during World War II. These Brazilians, from São João Del Rei (Minas Gerais), integrated, in 1943, the 3rd Battalion of the 11th Infantry Regiment of the Brazilian Expeditionary Force (FEB). Close to the 24th minute of the film, we are presented to the Italian historian Giovanni Sulla, scholar of the Brazilian participation in the fight against fascism in Italy. He appears twice in the documentary. The testimony of Sulla, within the articulation with other filmic elements, such as the testimonies of former Brazilian combatants, aids the construction, in narrative terms, of a glorious image of FEB. As a voice of knowledge, the presence of the historian in the documentary is used in order to clarify how the breaking of the Gothic Line – the German defense line in the Apennines, in Northern Italy – was decisive for the Allied fight in the Italian territory, a battle to which the Brazilians contributed. It is interesting to note that no Brazilian historian was invited to speak in this documentary. Maybe the filmmaker Durval Jr., at the time major of the Army, should assume (and rightly so) that Brazilian historiography gave little attention to the memory of FEB. On the other hand, it must be said that a New Military History was already under way in the 2000s in the country, when the film

was produced. However, what I want to highlight here is not simply the discussion of the historian's choice due to its nationality, or due to the historiography that he represents, as this says little about the documentary and its relationship with the memory of FEB. What must be questioned, in this film and in so many others, are the uses it makes of the historian (or any other expert or intellectual) as a source of historical knowledge to legitimize a version of History that satisfies the point of view of the filmmaker. In other words, the historian, in many other examples of *documentaries of memory*, is just another aesthetic element of a filmic scripture about the past.

In this way, it is up to those who study the documentary to question these procedures, not losing sight of the fact that the document is a monument in the sense that "it is first and foremost the result of a montage, conscious or unconscious, of History, of time, of the society that produced it, but also of the successive times during which it continued to live, perhaps forgotten, during which it continued to be manipulated, even if by silence" (LE GOFF, 1992, p. 548). What is at stake in the documentary by echoing these documents and testimonies in the film; stepping away from the silence to which they were previously convicted?

In loco registration is a predicate dear to the tradition of the documentary, but we should not read it just under its objective aspect, which is born from the fascination we all have concerning access to reality. Since the popular fairs of the 19th century, the cinema (or its ancestor, the cinematograph) has always been the spectacle of "life as it is", even if this life was staged, that the world before the eyes of the viewers was all rebuilt and experienced as true. The cinema satisfies very well this desire of the modern man for the real, by configuring itself as an aesthetic experience, which, deep down, is affective and perceptive. This applies for both fictional films and documentaries. As much as the documentary is coated with objectivity, we should not deny its ability to reveal and reform the world, which means we have to consider in our analytical horizon that the reality to which the documentary gives us access is a reality of second order, with a strong mark of the interpretation of the filmmaker who, in his formative gesture, materializes in the film all his expressive will, inviting us to share the world under his point of view. A point of view that always comprises an ideological positioning, since "the documentary is never a neutral 'history class', but a skilled work that must be interpreted by the viewer with the same care dedicated to the interpretation of a dramatic film [or fiction film]" (ROSENSTONE, 2010, p. 112).

To better deal with the documentary in the field of History, it is essential to understand that objectivity and subjectivity are coincident in the systematic of the cinematographic *doing*, they do not cancel each other out and do not decharacterize the identity of one or the other. The understanding that the film is, above all, the formation of a sensibility and that, therefore, addresses the viewer by the perception, help us to broaden the perspectives on the documentary, which ceases to present itself as the reservoir of the traces of the real to characterize itself as a “creative interpretation of reality”. In this perspective, we move the documentary away from a condition of a cinema that mirrors or reflects the real, or as a true image of the past, to instead consider it as a construct *of* and *about* the world experienced. In terms of method, we are led to worry less about a faithful or true representation of the past and more about the ethical commitment of this representation of the past. All representation modes of a documentary are determined by – and determine – an ethical attitude of the director before what is represented. Nothing is gratuitous in a film, neither in a documentary, which has in the human experience the raw material for its execution and invention of the the historical world.

The documentary as place and media “of memory”

To elect the documentary as place and media “of memory” leads us to discuss how much this kind of cinema authorizes a multifaceted game able to instrumentalize memories – redefining them or not –, update feelings and resentments, and, finally, characterize itself as a reconfiguration of the meanings and experiences of the identities of social groups. Knowing that memory and identity are united, that they are inseparable from each other, we cannot leave aside the discussion that the historical documentary, or *documentary of memory* (GAUTHIER, 2011), serves the memory projects of certain groups – or design a ideal of nation – raising a collective memory that “works as an instance of regulation of individual memory”, in the terms of Danièle Hervieu-Léger (apud CANDAU, 2014, p. 49). “There is no identity search without memory”, attested Candau. However, conversely, it can be said that “the memory search is always accompanied by a sense of identity, at least individually” (2014, p. 19).

In these terms, the *documentary of memory* recalls, in the exercise of the past, an instance that creates identities. The experience of watching the film can generate in viewers a range of feelings and perceptions and, among them, the recognition of certain common meanings related to the past being remembered. Cinema is, first

and foremost, a collective work and the power that political advertising gave it in the 1930s-1940s lies exactly in the fact that cinema is “a work for the masses”, since the exhibition of a film is a collective catharsis. It must be said, it is not only the movie, but all the cinematic apparatus (the big screen, the dark room, the projection) that allows for this condition. On the other hand, in terms of identity and memory, it is naive to believe that everyone involved in the reception of the film share the same meanings, that the memories the film arouses in them have occurred “according to a culturally determined and socially organized way”. The smaller the group and the stronger the memory, for being rooted in a cultural tradition, we can say that the greater chances for this to occur. However, it is necessary to problematize that “any attempt to describe a memory that is common to all members of a group from their remembrances, at a given point in their lives, is reductionist, because it keeps in the dark what is not shared” (CANDAUI, 2014, p. 34).

What and *how* to recall can be determined by social groups. That is how a strong State operates, saying to its citizens that events are memorable, what should be celebrated, that the past deserves to be “worshiped” and crystallized by “places of memory” (NORA, 1993). History itself works in this direction, we must admit. Pierre Nora reminds us that “memory is a ever current phenomenon, a bond lived in the eternal present; History, a representation of the past” (2013, p. 9). Therefore, the “places of memory” only exist because social groups see their past threatened by forgetfulness.

Here it is necessary to warn that the concept of *place of memory* does not apply to every documentary and that not every historical documentary should be understood in such a way. It would be an improper appropriation of Nora’s concept, as not every film that addresses themes of the past has a political vocation to memory. The documentary, here analyzed under the analytic key of the *places of memory*, is a film politically committed with the memory of a particular historical event, and its production is marked by a duty, the filmmaker seeks to do justice to the past. There are other movies in which the themes of History are the backdrop for the documentary narrative, but it is not equivalent to saying that these documentaries are instrumentalized in a given memory project. Even at the risk of generalizing, I would say that the documentaries produced by the History Channel, which in many cases aim at the dramatization of a historical fact – flirting with what is conventionally called “docudrama” or dramatized documentary – are examples of films that, despite of dealing with historical themes, are not necessarily productions born from a desire of memory, or in which we can clearly identify a political engagement of the director or

of the TV channel. This does not mean that these documentaries do not have a point of view concerning the past being portrayed, or that they are not good entertainment products that contribute to the crystallization of certain visions of History.

On memory and forgetfulness I prefer to think as Seixas (2003, p. 166): they are symbolic languages and full of affection, whether positive or negative, that enable the past not only to be recognized, but also built with a view to the future, as the past is always updated. Brought up in the present as something alive and current, the past is recreated in the instances of remembrance. Or, as suggested by Assmann (2011), all remembrance implies a displacement, a distortion, a deformation of what was remembered. The present is the time at which the memory happens, it participates actively in the process of remembrance, which also leads us to think with Candau, that “the activity of the memory that is not inscribed to a project from the present has no identity charge, and, more often, is equivalent to not remembering anything” (2014, p. 149). And the author complements: “there is no true act of memory which is not anchored in present identity challenges” (CANDAU, 2014, p. 150).

It is up to whoever chooses the documentary as an object of study to pay attention to the fact that the films also operate a deformation in remembered events, in an attempt to adjust the past to the identity games of the present, and this is becoming increasingly true, according to Candau (2014), when more and more groups and individuals assert their claims to the memory.

Regarding the silences that operate on the past when choosing to recall certain historical events at the expense of others, Pollak (1989, p. 5) believes in forgetfulness as a resistance factor of those groups that are powerless to oppose, even if momentarily, the official discourses. To him, feelings such as guilt and fear operate as activators of silence about the past, in which the unsaid or unspeakable feeds, in the social actors, a anguish for not having someone to share their memories, which end up inhabiting the “shadow zones” of History. But these individuals are waiting for the appropriate moment so that those memories are expressed in an act of pure outburst of accumulated resentments, which in many cases can be read as a political gesture, a desire of memory.

This can be found in films like *Paragraph 175* (2000), by Jeffrey Friedman and Rob Epstein, and *Männer, Helden, Schwule Nazis* (2005) by Rosa von Praunheim, which discuss, in different ways, homosexuality in the History of Nazi Germany. The first portrays the Nazi persecution of homosexuals, who were marked with a pink triangle and sent to the concentration camps, where,

according to some reports of survivors, the end of these people was terrible, being tortured and killed with great cruelty. The title of the documentary is inspired by the paragraph 175, which was introduced in German criminal law in 1871, with the goal of punishing “homosexual behavior between men”, and allowed the Nazis in power to put into practice the persecution and murder of gay men. It is estimated that “around 54 thousand homosexuals were condemned during the Nazi regime. Seven thousand were killed in concentration camps”, and the paragraph in question was valid in the Federal Republic of Germany until 1969 (HOMOSSEXUAIS VÍTIMAS..., 2008). *Männer, Helden, Schwule Nazis* “addresses the paradoxical relationship between homosexuality and the ideas of right-wing radicalism, whose aesthetics are increasingly present in the current gay scene” (DOCUMENTÁRIO DEBATE..., 2007). In the film, the German gay director, Rosa Von Praunheim, goes beyond the paradox between homosexuality and neo-Nazism, and aims his camera to the life stories of important personalities of the Third Reich, such as Ernst Röhm, chief of the Assault Section, the security troop of the Nazi party, and even Adolf Hitler and his vice Rudolph Hess do not escape of having their sexualities in scene.

The stories of the “gay holocaust” during World War II were silenced for years, but gradually that seems to be changing in Germany itself. In May 2008, a mixture of installation and sculpture, created by artists Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset, was erected in front of the Holocaust Memorial to pay tribute to the homosexuals killed in concentration camps in the 1930s-1940s during the Nazi regime. According to the news report by DW/Brazil, “the rectangular shape of the new monument converses with the gray rectangular columns of the memorial to thr Jews murdered by Hitler’s regime” (HOMOSSEXUAIS VÍTIMAS..., 2008). As well as this monument, both documentaries mentioned above can be interpreted as *places of memory*; they have the duty to keep awake the memory of injustice, are responses to the silencing to which “the gay holocaust” was condemned for years. As happened with this genocide, there are other examples that victimized Gypsies, black people, and people with physical and mental disability as part of a sanitation project of the German society of the time, which included not only the the Jewish people, as we tend to believe due to the proliferation of books, films, and TV shows, from the early 1960s, that helped raise the Jewish Holocaust as an universal trope of a policy of memory (HUYSSSEN, 2014). Documentaries such as *Paragraph 175* and *Männer, Helden, Schwule Nazis* operate in the “shadow zones” of World War II History, put in evidence the unsaid, break the barriers of the framework previously

imposed to the memory of these events. In the films, the wounds, tensions and contradictions between the official image of the past and the painful memories of those who survived are revealed.

These and other documentaries that aim to create a memory of historical events, having in the film an ethical and political gesture of the present to the past, do not consider History only a subterfuge for the narrative, but a plot involving silencing, traumas, sorrows, and resentments. These films fulfill the same role of archives, museums, monuments, heritage, and celebrations at the present time, they exist due to a *desire of memory*. Places and media “of memory”, these documentaries are the refuge of a living, experiential memory that translates in the film (as a media support)⁴ a cultural memory. All *cultural memory* is artificial, thus, produced. This is an aspect of which we must not lose sight when discussing a documentary film, as a place and media “of memory”. However, in its artificiality resides the way in which individual memories overcome times, are transmitted through generations. If we think as Assmann, recognizing that there is no memory without forgetfulness, and vice versa, we have that the *cultural memory*, which is saved/stored in *media of memory* – such as the film –, is always the product of a writing of the past under the “[...] risk of deformation, of reduction and instrumentalization of remembrance” (2011, p. 19), which, for the author, should not be seen as a problem, but a confirmation of the reconstructive character of any memory. To remember is to narrate (RICOEUR, 2010), through this act of memory we resignify the world in its temporal dimension. That is why there is a need to differentiate the memory from the past event. According to Candau, a memory “[...] is an image (*imago mundi*), but that acts on the *event (anima mundi)*, not integrating the length and adding the future of the past” (2014, p. 66-67).

Distortion or deformation is inherent to memory, since the memory is an interpretive gesture of the past event, it cannot be confused with false memories. The first is a natural process, while false memories are lies created with a specific purpose, and may serve to a memory project, being as dangerous as the erasure or destruction of the traces of the past. The false memory is a voluntary manipulation of a memory, which puts the act of remembrance under suspicion. Before the “sin of distortion”, as suggested by Daniel L. Schacter, the falsification of memory is of another order. To the author, we have to assume that “current knowledge,

⁴I use here the term “film” to refer to the documentary support, but it should not be excluded from our thinking other media that serve to the contemporary audiovisual, such as analog and digital video.

opinions, and feelings can influence our memories of the past and shape our impressions of current people and objects” (2003, p. 197). According to Schacter, every time that the past is updated by a memory, we rewrite it in a way that it fits our present opinions and needs. In his studies, the psychologist identified five types of memory distortion:

Distortions of consistency and of change show how our theories regarding ourselves can lead us to reconstruct the past in a way predominantly similar to the present or different from it. Hindsight distortions (“late understanding”) reveal that the memories of past events are filtered by current knowledge. The self-centered distortions illustrate the powerful function of the ego in the creation of images and memories of reality. And the stereotypical distortions demonstrate how generic memories shape the interpretation of the world, even when we are not aware of their existence or influence. (SCHACTER, 2003, p. 172, our translation)

The problem of false memory is a separate issue for us to think about the relationship of the documentary with memory and history, especially if we consider the imperative of the testimony that dominated this kind of cinema from the 1960s-1970s with the advent of synchronized sound. The call for oral witnesses became a trend of this *documentary of memory*; in many films that address traumatic themes of our history, survivors/victims are invited to remember before a camera in terms of a battle against forgetfulness, the desire of memory crosses the relationships between the filmmaker and social characters. In these films, memories are a bridge between the present and the past being portrayed, therefore, having the memory or the act of remembering as an analytical key to these *documentaries of memory* seems like a safe way to deal with the problem of false memory that does not escape this kind of cinema.

To Assmann, the difficulty to establish a parameter for judging the credibility of memories, is due to the need to turn the page. Instead of a search for the historical truth (always innocuous), the historian is more interested – and I add here the filmmaker – in the authenticity of the very act of remembering. We need to question what is at stake concerning the remembrance. It may be that the what is said does not match the facts, is not a faithful reproduction of events (and we know it shall never be), but this is not the same as saying that we are facing false memories and that these should be despised; on the contrary, it is important to problematize these

memories, since they can hardly be verified, which leads us to focus more on *how* these memories are updated.

In the case of studies on *documentaries of memory*, the analysis should not be restricted to what witnesses say, *what* they remember, but mainly on *how* the filmmaker handles the testimonial content of these memories. Therefore, methods such as content analysis or methodological perspectives that address the film reducing the analysis to the text (to what the characters and the director say), without considering the specificity of the cinematic language, are limited to a reading that elects the testimony as a first-order discourse in a documentary, when, in fact, the “voice” of the documentary is the set of all codes of a film, which organized in form of narrative “[...] conveys what is the filmmaker’s point of view and how this view is manifested in the act of creating the film” (NICHOLS, 2005, p. 76). The testimony is just one of many elements that compose a documentary, and some films forego them. On the other hand, it is true that in many documentaries witnesses are the main focus of the documentary narrative, in despite of other elements, but this is not the same as saying that the potentialities of testimonial content are explored in the film. On the contrary, sometimes the filmmaker is blind before the strength of testimonies and act little on them. It is as if the film was worthy just for the record of the memories, when in fact the very way this record is done already says a lot about the authenticity of the act of remembering.

The way a scene is presented to viewers says a lot about how the filmmaker intends to deal with the testimonial content. For example: the *in loco* record of a survivor visiting the ruins of a concentration camp during World War II, nowadays. He can find in the ruins an artifice that is less narrative than an operative of remembrance, the “reunion” of the survivor with the place of the trauma helps raise in memory the emotional appeals related to a particular memory of the horror. If this survivor silences in front of the camera, naively we can think that there is nothing to be said, however, we know that it is often difficult for some survivors to find ways of telling what they actually witnessed, give meaning and materiality to the testimony. In this case, the silence says little about the image of the past, but its duration in the scene attests to the authenticity of the memory. I agree with Gauthier, the geniality of a filmmaker lies in the way he leads the document (whether the file materials, testimonials, or *in loco* records) to exist within the film, “[...] at history’s disposal without removing anything from his artistic invoice” (2011, p. 202).

The film *Nostalgia de la luz* (2010), by Patricio Guzmán, is an example of how this artistic geniality materializes in a film of “[...] cosmic serenity, a luminous intelligence, of a sensitivity capable of melting stones” (MANDELBAUM, 2010), having to deal with a hard theme: the political disappearances in Chile during Pinochet’s dictatorship. An artistic geniality that, perchance, adds to the documentary a sensitive capability without giving up a statement that resembles the historic discourse, as I have been defending as characteristic of this kind of *documentary of memory*.

In the vicinity of the observatories in the Atacama desert, the military Government transformed the ruins of a 19th century exploration mine in the biggest concentration camp of the Chilean dictatorship. There were sent several political prisoners of which few survived. Since the first sequence, we are introduced to a nostalgic image of Chile, the memory comes in an autobiographical tone, we discover the filmmaker’s awe for aiming to the sky, to the stars. It was in the 1970s, during the Government of Salvador Allende, that “science fell in love with Chile’s sky”, bringing to the Atacama desert several scientists from all over the world who built the largest telescopes on Earth. But the military coup in 1973 suspended incentives to astronomical research, which only survived in the country thanks to the persistence of Chilean astronomers and the help of foreign researchers. Narrated in the first person, the documentary takes a subjective narrative which, according to Nichols (2005), strengthens the indicative nexus among the documentary images, the testimonies, and the historical events. Concerning the human experience, the narratives of life or autobiographical highlighted remembrance as an act that “[...] consists in mastering the very past to make an inventory not of what was lived, [...] but what remains from what was lived”(CANDAUI, 2014, p. 71).

In the first half hour of the film we are under the impression that the main focus are the telescopes built in the Atacama desert, “an punished land, impregnated with salt, where human remains are mummified and objects remain frozen in time”. During the description, we see general plans that reveal the vastness of the desert and the wind removing the fine sand; camera movements are rare, and occur mainly when the director wants to demonstrate its presence in that inhospitable territory, valuing the narration. In the scenes inside the observatory and in the desert, the objects are the ones moving to the camera, a preference for static plans that seek to give a temporal dimension of the life recorded in the take, even though in the desert “there is nothing. There are no insects, no animals, no

birds. And, yet, it is full of history”. It is not up to Guzmán’s camera to demote objects from their time, from their duration.

The first interviewee only appears after nearly 15 minutes of documentary. The appearance of astronomer Gaspar Galaz also leads us to the topic of science, of the galaxy. An impression strengthened in the following sequence, when we are introduced to the archaeologist Lautaro Núñez, who develops his studies in the Atacama desert looking for evidence of pre-Columbian peoples. It is from the filmmaker’s encounters with these characters that we begin to realize very subtly that Guzmán’s interest for astronomy led him to rediscover with the theme he has been chasing since his return to Chile after years of exile: the memory of the dictatorship.

However, this interest in astronomy is not a simple pretext to make the film, on the contrary, the director constructs relationships between his childhood passion – announced at the beginning of the documentary – and the theme of dictatorship. What led him to the desert was not the telescopes, but the fact that in the vicinity of the observatory are, today, the ruins of one of the largest concentration camps of the military regime, where thousands of political prisoners were killed. Later, we are introduced to other characters, Vicky Saavedra and Violeta Berríos, who belonged to the group of the few women who, at the time of filming, still persisted in looking for the remains of their relatives in the vastness of the desert. This group is known as “Women of Calama”, and the testimonies of these characters have a strong emotional appeal, expressed a complexity of feelings that involve and move these women’s search. Vicky, concerning a time when they found her brother’s skull fragments and one foot, reports:

I remember his sweet look and all that remains is this: some teeth and fragments of his bones. And a foot. Our last moment together was when his foot was in my house. Because, when they found the grave, I knew it was his shoe and his foot. That night, I got up and I stroked his foot. And it had... an odor of decomposition. It was still inside a sock. A red sock, dark red. I took it out of the bag and stared at it. I sat in the living room for a long time. My mind was completely empty. I had no ability to reflect. I was in total shock. The next day, my husband left for work and I spent the morning with my brother’s foot. We met again. It was a great happiness and a great disappointment because, at that time, I was aware that my brother was dead. (NOSTALGIA DE LA LUZ, 2010, our translation)

Both characters have eyes set on the earth; this is how they are represented by Guzmán's camera, which registers their advances through the Atacama. The director prefers general plans to describe them, scenes that generate a mixture of infinity and grandeur on the part of the desert that seems to want to bury them. To Vicky and Violeta, the desert is a traumatic place, in the search there is pain, but also hope, feelings that cause these women to experience the memory as a *potency* (ASMANN, 2011). The memories of those years of repression in Chile are still experienced by these women in a intense way. For them, the past is an alive memory, updated at the risk of the present. In a sensitive and poetic way, Guzmán crosses these women's looks – sometimes invisible to Chilean society itself – with those of astronomers who focus on the galaxy. As much as they are part of different worlds, the desert connects them in the same time: the past.

Final considerations

The *places of memory* of Pierre Nora, when electing the memory as a “bond lived in the eternal present”, is a symptom of a system of historicity that has the current time as horizon, as Hartog warned. On the other hand, for the author, the demand of memory that we witness in contemporary society should be interpreted as an expression of the crisis of our relationship with time, in which the present the accompanying *presentism* proved to be unbearable (HARTOG, 2014, p . 186). The historian is also a critic of the role the witness currently assumes:

The witness nowadays is a victim or a descendant of a victim. This victim status serves to support its authority and feeds the kind of reverent awe that sometimes accompanies it. Hence the risk of confusion between authenticity and truth or, even worse, of an identification of the latter with the former, at a time when the separation between veracity and reliability should be maintained, on the one hand, and, on the other, between truth and evidence. (HARTOG, 2014, p. 227, our translation)

This brings us to the problem of the unreliability of memory, from which does the documentary cannot escape, since this kind of cinema seems increasingly seduced by the testimonial content that coats the filmic narrative like an aura. However, since many of these historical documentaries deal with memories crossed by an affective potential of memory, the search for truth and evidences on what is remembered does not get us anywhere. However, this is not the same as saying that to analyze these films it is necessary to put the subjective truth above

an objective and empirically secured experiential world. According to Assmann, those who deal with affective memories need to recognize that they escape “[...] not only from external verification, but also from its own revision” (ASSMANN, 2011, p. 271).

Thinking of these documentaries by the point of view of the media and places “of memory”, we employed a problematization suggested by Candau on the vocation of these places, writings, and monuments for fixing the past. When contributing to the maintenance and transmission of the memory of historical events, they put us “in the presence of ‘formalized pasts’, which shall limit the scope for interpretation of the past and that, therefore, can be a constituent of an ‘educated’ memory, or even of an ‘institutional’ memory, and therefore shared” (CANDAU, 2014, p. 118). The film is also in this set of supports, or media, of memory, which fix the past, in index terms of the record of the moving image, plus sound. However, unlike these other media, the documentary film is subscribed to this rhetoric of “formalized pasts”, with one advantage: the possibilities of interpretation of the past are extended due to this kind of cinema being able to reproduce and manipulate other media of memory, such as photography, writing, places, and also film, since the cinema can be self-referential. In addition to this, there is the fact that technical advances have provided the emergence of lighter cameras and synchronized sound, which made the testimonial narrative an asset to the documentary over the other media of memory, as it highlights the act of remembering, either for its ability to update the past, or the challenges and threats that memory itself brings to this past that breaks from the present as in a “moment of danger”, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin.

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submitted on: Jul. 3, 2018 | approved on: Oct. 24, 2018.